A.Kontorovich
MASTER OF THE NIGHT
ESCAPE FROM
TARKOV

The third book of the novel based on the video game Escape from Tarkov

Alexander Kontorovich

MASTER OF THE NIGHT

“Let me put it this way: I’m not anyone’s friend. Not even yours...»

The Predator is a mysterious figure.

Who is he? Many had failed to figure it out. So they stopped trying, and choose to cooperate with the mystery man. After all, he’s very good business.

Well, except for the cultists. He had hurt them way too much. Affronts like that can only be washed away with blood. So they started gathering bandit leaders and representatives of former security forces. Only one question is on the agenda. Hand the Predator over, he’s ours!

Well... if he’s yours, take him!

But don’t blame us for the consequences...

Chapter 1

“What the fuck you want?” The Boar shifted his considerable weight to turn on his chair towards the doorway. “Can’t a man eat in peace?”

“Hey, boss, so here’s the rub…” A low-level thug shifted uneasily on the doorstep. “We got challenged to a meet!”

“Who the fuck?!” The bandit boss almost choked on his food. “Did they drink themselves into a fucking stupor, whoever the fuck they are? Where do they get the balls to challenge ME?”

“Couldn’t tell who it was. Caught Misha in an alley, put a blade up to his face and said to pass on to his boss, meaning you, to come over for a talk.”

“Who the hell are they?” The bandit was a little worried.

If they’re starting with such an obvious affront, then they’re either fucking idiots or very serious. Idiots… doubtful. This shit has been going on for months, so most things have kinda settled down, there are some ground rules at this point. The really dumbfuck stupid ones are dead and buried, and the ones that remain have at least half a brain. Life is the best teacher.

Challenging the head of a serious gang — you gotta think twice. Or five times. And framing it the way they did… Kaban had a hard time even comprehending the potential level of stupidity.

Serious guys. Sure, there were a few around, but they were far from stupid and they could ask for a meeting in a much simpler way. There’s absolutely no sense in making the situation so difficult right from the start. Neither the BEARs nor the former cops would start off this way. And the foreigners… they showed no interest in hanging

out before. And they weren't idiots either.

So who?

"Where's the meet?"

"Mars Cinema."

Boar knew this place. The old cinema building had been rebuilt right before shit hit the fan, transformed into an ultra-modern mall. He had happened to visit it a few times. Not a bad place actually, there's a lot of… treats.

"It's fucking big. Where exactly?"

"First floor, where the casino used to be."

Huh, so that's how it's gonna go. It's a real fox hole, that place. The boss knew four different entry-exit points, but there could be even more. Covering every entrance and exit… It's possible. There's definitely enough bodies. But highly doubtful that the ones that set up the meet didn't know the place inside and out. Play it too careful, scare them off, they wouldn't even show up. But spread the rumor that the Boar was scared of a simple conversation, hid behind his thugs... Not the worst, but sometimes a whisper is enough to tear down an empire!

He didn't need any rumors, especially if they're unfounded.

"When?"

"The day after tomorrow. 1300 hours."

"Okay. Call up Lorick!"

The head of security showed up quickly and the boss set him a

single task — do everything in his power to make the upcoming meeting as safe as possible. Didn't matter how, just make it safe! The old bandit felt in his gut that something was off. A danger you don't know is always worse than one you do. Not least because he couldn't figure out where he had made a mistake. And there's no doubt that a mistake was made, otherwise these anonymous foes wouldn't be so brash…

So he set off to the meeting in a very sour mood. He wasn't expecting anything good to come from this whole mess…

The head of the security division gave his report. "Nobody entered the building, we've been here since last night, no one even approached the place. A few guys were rummaging around a little further off. Scavs, they were digging around in the rubble. Looking for something no doubt…"

Lorick looked at the map. "There used to be a grocery store there. Some say there was a basement, too… But early on something hit it and it folded in on itself. So no basement to speak of, you can't dig it out with just your bare hands…"

The boss waved his hand at the underlings. "Fuck the basement, we got more important shit to do!"

He didn't approach the mall initially. One of his security guys went first. Take a look around, listen. Just in case…

And he came back amazingly quickly.

"Boss, there's a dude in there! Cape and hood! And he gave me this weird look and told me to go call the boss. Says he has absolutely nothing to say to me, it's beneath him!"

"He alone?"

“Well, I didn’t see anyone else. He’s sitting on the table. You know, the green one, for cards!”

“How’s the visibility?”

“There’s obviously no artificial light, lamps are off. But the windows are fine, no one covered them. You can see a little.”

“Okay,” the bandit said as he stood up heavily. “Lorick, you follow me! Not too closely, but if I shout, you run up like a bullet, got it?”

The once marvellous building had been ravaged by fate. The posters curled and shriveled, the exquisite wallpaper falling off the walls. That’s what dampness does, happens to abandoned houses everywhere. Brick houses, once a symbol of comfort, showed a different side. Turns out if no one is living in a brick house, it quickly begins to disintegrate.

A very old-school gangster known as Chartreuse once pontificated on why that happens at a campfire.

“The soul has left this house, so it starts to die. And it only happens to brick houses, the concrete ones stand for ages! It’s because brick is made by man, with his own hands. Lay the bricks by hand too. And concrete… Where can you use your hands, on what? The carcass is metal, a machine mixes it, a machine pours it. There’s no place for soul. So the concrete box just stands there, it doesn’t need a person. No soul… cares for no one, scared of almost nothing. Look at the pillboxes left after the second world war, they’re still standing, nothing gonna happen to them!”

After looking around, the Boar pushed open the door to the room with the player tables. The security guy had spoken the truth, there was someone in a cape sitting on one of them. A hood covered the face in such a way that it was impossible to tell what they looked like. Is it a man or a woman? Young or old?

“So,” the gangster grumbled, as he sat on the next table (surprising himself with how soft it was). “You called, I’m here. What you want?”

The person slowly turned their head and a pair of sharp attentive eyes became visible under the hood.

“It’s good that you chose to listen to us right away.”

“Who’s us? Also, don’t you know any manners, it’s not polite to converse like that. Why not put on a snorkel while you’re at it!”

A short laugh.

The hood fell back, and before the gangster boss was an older dude, about forty.

“We don’t really show our faces to the unconverted, best not to attract attention to any single one of us. We are all equal, so it matters not which one of us speaks the words of truth to you. Any Witness has the right…”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” said Boar, turning his palm towards the man. “C’mon. Don’t be trying to convert me or anything like that. We have our business, you have yours. I have no interest in your business. You have anything you wanna talk about, talk. No? Then I’ll be on my way.”

The man shook his head.

“Have it your way. But you’re wrong!”

“What’s your name?” The bandit tilted his head. “It’s a little strange, I’m right here, not hiding, not obfuscating, anyone can find me if they want. How about you?”

“I’m a witness!”

The bandit was starting to get pissed off. “Witnesses usually saw something illegal happen and spoke about it. There is no law anymore! You wanna talk, you name yourself. Who are you, who do you work for, who can vouch for you?”

The Witness was quiet for a bit, apparently thinking. Then he looked up and carefully peered at the bandit sitting across from him.

“Very well. I’ll speak in a way you are used to.”

“Should have been like this from the start,” the Boar grumbled and shifted around on the table to get comfortable.

“We are the Witnesses to the Arrival. We have no boss, we follow no one. Except for the true rulers of this world. But you wouldn’t understand yet…”

“You should try me. I’ve talked to all kinds of people in my life. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, and even… fuck, what are they called? Oh, yeah! Luddites! You wanna believe any bullshit, it’s your right, no one is forcing you. If you don’t fuck up in regular life, then we can find common ground. Who are you in your organization?”

“I’m a Priest. My name is Peter.”

“You know my name already. What’s the issue at hand?”

“We need the Predator.”

“Oh, is that all? And I thought this was going to be a difficult conversation.”

“Actually, that’s not it. He has a man. Calls himself Denis. We need him too.”

“I’m not asking why. You should value that. But!” The bandit lifted his index finger. “This isn’t an easy issue. As a matter of fact, it’s a fucking difficult issue.”

“Name your price.”

“Not enough money in the world. Besides, who the fuck needs any money after you’re dead!”

The Priest was quiet for a while.

“Are you turning the job down?”

“Okay, look, so I hope you’ll agree that we’re not just a bunch of dopes, right?”

Peter nodded, agreeing.

“Kirill was a serious gangster. Very experienced. He was killed right in his own room in front of his guards. And no one saw shit… Makar might have been an asshole, but he had a solid team. Around forty guns. Everyone’s dead — his guys, his slaves, his chicks. No one survived. I assume you’ve heard about Foma already?”

“I know whom you speak of, yes.”

“Killed right in his home with his guards. Seventeen dead, however the fuck more wounded. And yet again, no one saw anything.”

“You want to tell me it’s all the Predator?” The priest was surprised.

“I’m not just telling you, I can prove it! You know Misha Falin?”

The cultist cringed. Seemed like this name surfaced some painful associations. He nodded.

“He’s a full-on sociopath with no limits, and even he chose not to get into it with Denis. Rumor has it that this insight came at the cost of a bunch of Misha’s men. So put yourself in my position, you want a conflict with that kind of person?”

“Are you turning the task down?”

“I wanna live, you know? What you can you offer me to change my mind on that?”

“And you don’t know where we can find them?”

“And I don’t wanna know! Some knowledge has the nasty effect of shortening one’s life. This is exactly that kind of knowledge. Although…” The bandit grinned to himself. “I can give you one way to get in touch. Free of charge, as a friend. You want it?”

The Priest squinted and immediately looked just like a school teacher. So much so, that Boar was taken aback.

“All right, I’ll bite.”

“It’s very simple. Just announce that you’re gonna take off Predator’s head! Announce it loud and clear, so everybody hears about it. Just say, ‘I’m so and so, I want this, this is my address.’”

“And then what?”

“Buy yourself a coffin, place it nearby, and wait. Somebody will arrive shortly…»

“What’s the coffin for?”

“So there’s somewhere to place you after the visit. Think about your friends, why make any extra bother for them, be thoughtful in your

last moments!”

The cultist went quiet and thought for a while. He leaned over and drew something on the table with his finger. Then he raised his head.

“So we can’t expect any help from you?”

“Again, friend-o, I’m not tired of living yet! Predator’s got his own thing, we got ours. We don’t interact or fight. As sailors say, we diverge along parallel lines. He doesn’t come up on us, we leave him be. Also keep in mind I don’t know shit about you. And, frankly, I don’t want to. You’re out there, underground somewhere, so who gives a fuck! We don’t go there, no need for it. Our interests are all above ground.”

“What am I to tell the people that sent me?”

“The truth. We met, had a pleasant chat about this and that and went our separate ways. There’s nothing I can do to help you, even if I wanted to. It’s not my area of expertise! Go ask USEC, even that might be more useful. I heard they’ve shown some interest in him. And also…” The gangster went quiet for a while. “There’s this figure... The Hood they call him. He has some dealings with the Predator. I don’t know what kind! I don’t go into his shit and I don’t suggest anyone else does, this dude does not like when somebody shows any unsolicited interest in him. If you don’t fear for your head, you can try that.”

The priest nodded.

“Thank you for your advice! We’ll take it into consideration. But if you change your mind, you can leave a message on this table. Just draw a cross and we’ll know. And we’ll find a way to get in touch.”

Back at his «residence,» the bandit thought for a while. Then he knocked on his door and ordered his subordinate to look for Lorick.

He did not take long and Lorick was soon was sitting in a chair across from the boss.

“Drink...» Boar poured some vodka into a glass.

They drank.

They chased the drink with a snack and repeated it.

“Here’s the thing…» Boar bit his lip. “It was the cultists who hit me up…”

“We figured. We were watching the building, nobody left. Then we went in... We looked all over, from the attic to the basement. And we found a fresh breach in the wall downstairs. It heads underground somewhere. Nobody went down there, not really a good idea. And these breaches are the kind of stuff these guys do…”

“They want the Predator.”

Lorick shook his head.

“Did they also want you to deliver them the moon from the sky?”

“That would have been easier.”

“Yeah… So, is there gonna be trouble?”

“I don’t think so, they’re not a bunch of dupes either. They know there’s not much I can do to help. I sent them to USEC, hinted that they might know something.”

“Do they know something?”

“Well... there was a flicker in the air, some rumors. But warn the guys: keep your ears up! They are capable of punching a hole in our

basement too!”

“We’ll put stretch bombs everywhere, they won’t be able to come in in quietly,» the security boss said.

“All right! And also… someone should visit Khokhl. When Vortex shows up, let him know we want to talk. There’s a conversation for him…”

“This guy hasn’t been seen there in a while.”

“The fucking huckster must have some dealings with him! He’s sly, the bastard! I’ll never fucking believe he hasn’t thought of a way of getting in touch! That dude will never miss any opportunity! Tell him to find Denis! It’s in his best interest too…”

The merchant’s business had been dramatically better since the Boar’s men dropped off a whole container full of military hardware at the warehouse. According to the agreement with Denis, he could put some of the contents up for sale, sharing the proceeds. Which the sly merchant did not hesitate to do immediately.

This arrangement paid off immensely — there were plenty of people wanting to upgrade their equipment...

What was somewhat puzzling was the absence of the new partner. It’s been a while since their last meeting, and he never showed up, even to pick up money and the goods!

Although there had been a call on the radio that was received by one of the men, and a short note appeared in the cache: «Continue to act in accordance with the plan.” The note included a short list of what was allowed to be put up for sale.

And judging by the note, the writer knew exactly what was in the container. And, therefore, was aware of the recent mission. So, the

unknown Predator was somewhere nearby, the answer came quickly enough. Denis was not lying... this man has eyes and ears everywhere.

Okay... businesses can operate without one of the partners.

The Boar's request to find the mysterious Predator's messenger was answered by Khohol immediately.

"Oh, no problem! We'll find him! Just as soon as he shows up!"

He didn't speak of the secret communication channel. There's always an advantage in having information that others don't. As soon as the door was closed behind the bandit's messenger, the merchant rushed to the radio station. Just in time, it was their arranged time to connect. So what's the point of waiting?"

"Thirty-two here, I'm calling for guest!"

That's exactly how he was supposed to start a communication session.

He had to repeat it several times — Khohol did not know whether someone would answer this time, or he would have to just relay his message in the hope that it would be recorded on the other end.

"This is guest." Suddenly, the radio spoke back, surprisingly free of any static. Clearly, the transmitter of the unknown speaker was powerful, or located somewhere very close by.

"Uh... so…» The trader was a bit thrown off. "Anyway, someone came from the Boar. He's looking for Denis!"

"Why?"

"Says there's a serious conversation to be had…"

“Roger that, 32. Your message will be delivered. Anything else?”

“Uh... no, nothing else!”

“Over and out.”

Khohol lowered his suddenly shivering hand and realized that his forehead was covered in sweat.

Oh, shit…

There is indeed a way to get in touch, and someone is sitting there at all times! And it’s not Vortex, it’s a completely new voice. And that means…

After downing a glass of vodka, the trader calmed down a bit.

So, Denis wasn’t lying. Although he hasn’t given Khohol any reason to doubt his words in other situations either…

So there’s constantly working communication. And there is a (likely very powerful) transmitter. It’s very doubtful that it’s around here somewhere, it would have been noticed by the guys ages ago. And if the transmitter is powerful, it certainly does not work on batteries. So, there’s electricity! And there is likely fuel for generators…

That all adds up to quite a group...

That’s the Predator’s trail! But it’s better not to walk on it yet... we’ll be better off!

***

In all honesty, we received the radio program basically by accident. Just random — Oleg was running past the radio station. What to say

and how to answer is laid out in an instruction on the table right there. The technician answered. He listened to the interlocutor, promised to report back to the boss.

“Boar, huh?” I scratch the back of my head. “Okay then... let’s pay him a visit…”

We’re in the middle of something very important right now — studying the trophy hardware I picked up from the containers. The systems are complex, it’ll take some time to figure it out. So we’re just picking at it.

For a while there the dormant IT administrator suddenly awoke in me, and with a long-forgotten passion I was unravelling the software’s tricks and looking for its vulnerabilities. Previously acquired knowledge helped me greatly — without it we wouldn’t have budged an inch from the starting point.

But things have started to move along a little. And Oleg is already blowing raspberries, imagining how and where we can use our new trophies.

And we have many ideas!

When we finally get to the server room, we were surprised to find out that the bunker is connected to a network! It had some information that was constantly being sent out.

So we hunkered down to analyze the data…

And after a while we had to pat ourselves on the back!

Remember how we opened some doors? Yeah, yeah… by feeding the life support system false information about a malfunction in the ventilation system, to make the computer think that if anyone’s there, they’ll be dead!

That’s what we fed... but we never reversed the procedure! We opened the doors, and then forgot about it, there were more important things to deal with. We didn’t return the system back into the initial state.

And now, upon analyzing the archive of the messages sent out, we established that data of the life support systems failure, in particular, ventilation, was sent into a network. And if someone was to believe the machine’s report (and why wouldn’t they believe it?), there is nothing and nobody alive here now, and no one could survive. Also, in general, it’s not safe for anyone to come here without putting themselves at risk.

Oleg immediately promised to write a program to continuously issue such reports, but I was already thinking about something else…

If there’s a network... and it still works somehow, that means someone needs it. The question is, who? And where is that someone hanging out?

The question of what use I can get out of this all is for a later time…

At least nobody’s going to try to get in.

***

“Red Two, Foxtrot!”

“This is Red Two!”

“What’s the situation?”

The operator raised his head again above the windowsill before answering. It’s empty... no movement. Was that a hallucination?

“No activity in the sector.”

“Roger that. Secure the incoming team.”

“Copy that, Foxtrot.”

“Over and out, Red Two.”

“Over and out.”

The operator made a sign to his comrades, and he looked out again. The next group on their way back from a mission was about to approach. And, according to reports, the guys were carrying a very heavy load. Naturally, they needed help! At least some cover from curios outsiders.

“Larry, left flank!”

“Roger that.” The swarthy Italian slipped into the next room, taking up position.

“Kempinski to the right!”

“Will do!”

“Henry, you and I are watching the center.”

The house, whose second floor they were occupying, was conveniently located with a corner protruding forward. The USECs had settled in this apartment, and they could cover three streets at once with sight and fire. Their comrades were approaching from the left and had to be covered.

Suddenly there’s suspicious activity in the sector under surveillance! Someone ran across…

Could it have been random, a few Savs roaming around? But maybe it wasn't! Anyway, the people at the base were alarmed and ordered the people on the ground to increase surveillance.

"I see the approaching group!" Larry reported. "They're walking slowly, looking around."

"Attention, everybody!" The operator looked through the scope.

Okay, the Italian sees the guys approaching, that's good! And no one seems to be behind them yet, that's great too! Watching! Very attentively — who ran through the ruins?

"Henry,» the operator said without taking his eyes off the scope. "Come out on the stairs, there's another window…"

"Gut!" The man said with a Polish accent.

Sound of receding footsteps, a clink sound...

Clink?

What's there to clink on the stairs? It's been cleaned with metal and broken glass swept away...

"Henry?"

Silence in the headphones…

"Henry, what the hell?!"

Nothing.

The operator cursed under his breath, took his eye off the scope and turned around.

To see two pairs of eyes looking at him, as well as two shotgun barrels.

‘Large-caliber shotguns… at this distance any hit would likely be fatal, my bulletproof vest can’t do much!’ was the thought that flashed through his mind.

A third stranger appeared in the doorway and made a gesture with his hand to put the gun down!

‘My guys can’t do anything in time! Any suspicious movement, and the guns will go off! And the third stranger has a grenade in his hand... and he nodded unequivocally towards the room where Larry was. So they know about him... And if they just throw a grenade in there... He won’t even know what hit him!’

Another person appeared in the doorway, took aim at the passage to the room where the Polish man went — they know about him too!

There was nothing he could do and the operator turned his hands towards them, showing he had no hostile intentions. He leaned over carefully and put his assault rifle on the floor.

And immediately there were a few more people in the room…

In less than half a minute all three USECs, disarmed and confused, were sitting with their backs against the wall. One of their attackers, who seemed to be their leader, called on the senior in the group with a gesture.

“Do you have a way to get in touch with the men walking down the street right now? Don’t worry, we won’t hurt anyone! You can tell them to be as careful as they possibly can when they pass by the broken red car, it’s booby-trapped! I don’t know who planted the landmine, but it’s powerful enough to send the entire group to meet their makers. Tell them to go around it, it’s clear.

He nodded at the headset of the radio station, at the same time bringing up the earpiece of the radio that his men had taken from one of the USECs.

“Call your people…”

The operator raised his hand and, slightly hesitant, pressed the button of the transmitter.

“Django to Red Two!”

“I’m here, Django.”

“Do you see the red car ahead of you?”

“We see it.”

“The car could be booby-trapped, I recommend a detour.”

“Red Two to Foxtrot!” The duty officer intervened when he heard the negotiations between the groups.

“Red Two here.”

“What are your assumptions based on?!”

“I can’t get this over radio.”

“Roger... Django to Foxtrot!”

“This is Django.”

“Bypass! Do you read me? Bypass! Backup route!”

“Django has taken the detour.”

So the approaching group has turned the other way, this route was considered unsafe. For a while there was silence in the channel. Ten minutes later, the radio operator of the approaching group got back in touch.

“Red Two to Django.”

“Yes…” the cameraman said with dry lips.

“Bypass complete. Moving ahead along the backup route. Leaving your area of responsibility.”

“Copy that. Have a safe trip!”

“Thank you, Red Two! See you around!”

“Roger, Red Two. Over and out.”

“Over and out.”

The oldest of the attackers put the borrowed radio station on the floor.

“There you go! We keep our word! Now, listen!”

He lowered the hood of his strange outfit onto his back. He kind of looked like he was wearing a monk’s cassock.

“Tell your management we want to meet. But not with anyone — we need a man who talked to the Predator’s messenger. This man should come here in three days time, we’ll wait for him. He can take any number of guards with him, he has nothing to be afraid of. We just want to talk…”

The operator nodded, his tongue refused to form words.

“That’s good! Your weapons will be behind the door, in the stairwell, we don’t need them. In five minutes you can go out and pick them up. Your comrade is there, too. I’m sorry, but we had to stun him and tie him up, otherwise he’d start shooting, and we didn’t need that. Any questions for me? No? That’s good.”

He got up almost silently and, without turning around, headed for the door. Next to him, without taking their eyes off the wary prisoners, eyes and guns, everyone else left one by one. The door slammed behind them.

***

“Did you check the car?” Mark Forbett looked at the operator sitting in front of him with curiosity.

“Yes, sir! There was a whole barrel of nasty stuff in there, obviously home-made, sir! The Bomb Disposal Squad said it would be enough to blow the car and everything around it to shreds!”

“And how was it supposed to work?”

“There were tripwires set up, just ordinary fishing lines. But set up very cleverly, they were very difficult to see even very close up.”

“Have you examined this location before?”

“Only through a scope, sir... There was an order against venturing out as we might have been spotted.”

“And detecting a trip mine through a scope…”

“Absolutely impossible, sir!”

“I see…” The counterintelligence officer nodded. “Well, you’ve been

very helpful! I won't keep you any longer!"

The counterintelligence officer did not arrive at the specified location alone, obviously. But his guards remained on the outskirts of the building and he entered the apartment itself without an escort. Forbett was not some pampered fool. Many times in his life he had gotten through some extremely unpleasant alterations. However, in this situation, he felt a little worried. The person he was about to meet was too unusual a figure.

Thorough examination of the meeting location using all kinds of equipment showed that there was at least one person present. Judging by the thermal background, he was in the very room where the conversation with the operator took place.

That's why Forbett wasn't exactly hiding his approach. His footsteps echoed along the empty stairs. That's the door…

The counterintelligence officer knocked.

"Come in! It's not locked!" A voice came from inside.

Ha! Does anyone even remember the concept of a locked door?

There was indeed one person in the room, he was sitting in a chair near a window.

"Have a seat!" the host said courtesly, nodding at a nearby chair.

Mark looked around and, since he didn't see anything suspicious, sat down. He did, however, move the chair to avoid sitting in front of the window. Who knows who might be looking at him through a scope? The thermal imaging camera can't see everything…

"So, you asked for a meeting…"

“Yes,» the man tilted his head.

“I’m listening.”

“We need the Predator.”

“You and everyone in this city.”

“Do you know where to find him?”

“I’m sorry, but first things first. Who am I dealing with?”

“Peter,» he said as he tilted his head again.

“That’s it? Who do you represent, and what authority do you have? I’m Mark Forbett, Counterintelligence Officer, if that tells you anything…”

“It does tell me much,» Peter nodded. “I am a Witness. My title among my brothers is Priest. Do you need me to explain what this means?”

“I don’t. I am somewhat aware of you and your, uh…”

The word “cult” was on the tip of his tongue. But out loud Mark used a different word.

“...organization.”

The Priest smiled.

“That’s not the word you wanted to use, is it? No bother, we’re not offended by such... delusions.”

The counterintelligence officer noted to himself that the person in front of him was ‘smart and purposeful, didn’t pay attention to

insignificant things.’

“I see…” Forbett relaxed a little. It seems the cultists didn’t want an outright conflict yet. Yet...

“We know how to get his attention,» the officer chose not to be coy. “And after that his messenger usually shows up.”

“Denis?”

A thought ran through the CI officer’s mind: ‘And here’s where I’m gonna get the upper hand! And figure out who it is exactly you want?! And why…’

“Not always. It might be anyone at all. And you might receive the message in a variety of ways, not just personally through a messenger. A note may appear right on your desk in a locked room.”

Peter tilted his head, puzzled.

“What do you mean? Does he not always send a messenger?”

“No. Not always. I told you, it might be anyone at all. Predator rarely repeats himself, he’s not really into clichés.”

‘Good, now think! And I’ll listen…’

“But do you know who this man is?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m struck by the feeling that our meeting has become an interrogation. And yet you’re not a detective and I’m not a suspect! Don’t you think I might also have some questions that I would like an answer to?”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Your goals and objectives are clear to us in principle. I won’t say that we have much overlap in this regard, but you don’t disturb us YET... We would like to prevent any possible misunderstanding in the future.”

This time, the Priest did not answer right away.

“I... we can’t guarantee that with a hundred percent probability. Your people sometimes behave... in wrong ways. They go where they shouldn’t go. They visit places of power, and not everyone is allowed to do that!”

‘What?! What the fuck is he talking about, places of power?’

“Give us a list of these places and I’ll see what we can do about it. Then we’ll talk…”

Peter nodded slowly.

“Okay... I’ll pass on your request. How can we meet again?”

“Is this place okay for you?”

“Yes, it’s fine. Draw a line on the wall near the entrance. If it’s crossed out once, the meeting is the next day. Twice…»

“Yeah, I got it. Well... I’ll see you next time!” Forbett said as he got up.

“Wait! What kind of man is the Predator?”

“Are you sure he’s even a man? And not a group of people or even... something else?”

“Someone else?”

“No, I spoke very deliberately,” the counterintelligence fired off a Parthian shot as he walked out.

‘Mull on this! Thinking out of the box is really good for one’s mind.’ Forbett laughed to himself meanly. ‘Man, computer, whatever the fuck else, how would I know? So here you go, boys, dig in…’

Chapter 2

I should visit Khokhl, for sure.

But…

Often, the best-laid plans immediately go to shit as soon as reality interferes. The same thing happened here, an obstacle appeared on the way to the trader's hideout.

No, nobody built a fortress wall, of course. Now that would have been unbelievable under the circumstances.

It's much simpler — one of the houses became a Scav colony. Which in and of itself is a surprise. Usually they weren't in the habit of forming packs like this.

Usually, it wouldn't be a problem if they were to set up somewhere else. I could easily circumvent them, alternative routes had been explored ages ago.

But!

From the very first day this loud and restless group engaged in its usual business — methodically scrounging the surrounding territory for anything useful. And since there are not that many houses around, it was not difficult to figure out what they would soon stumble upon.

Us, of course!

No, I wasn't afraid of them storming the place, their shitty equipment and weapons were no match for our «fort.» The autonomous firing turrets (we have already mounted three of them) securely block the main approaches. And it is quite possible to install a couple more of

these units, we even picked out where we could mount them.

Any attack on us is doomed, no doubt. But I will not be able to stop them from leaking information that there's suddenly some weird building, well-covered with all sorts of tricky devices.

The information is going to leak... but who'll hear it? That's anyone's guess.

Somebody brought in these autonomous guns! And there's definitely some information about them stored somewhere!

It's impossible to rule out a sudden visit by the true owners of this facility. And who knows what backdoors are built into the software of our computers? We're both good at computers, sure. But we're certainly not good enough to figure out any and all systems. We can cheat the remote control systems for a while, sure. But only up to the point anyone shows some serious interest…

On the one hand, the Scav problem wasn't worth much of a hassle. Just get Gavrish to send some guys and they will disperse these tramps in a matter of minutes. I just need to give the word…

But…

By doing so, I will show my interest in this particular part of the city! And the bandit is not a sucker. By getting rid of the potentially annoying attention from some unwelcome neighbors, it's possible I'll attract the attention of much more serious people. Yes, they are my situational allies for now. In some way they even owe me. But let's get real, this isn't permanent.

I can't give up the location of my base!

No one can know, under any circumstances.

That’s why I am lying on my belly now, carefully looking over the Scav’ abode through my binoculars.

So, what can I say…

A mix of ancient lawless pirates and a cheerful guerrilla army camp barely begins to describe the spectacle unfolding before my eyes.

They have enough brains not to make fires inside the house, their food is cooked outside. They have already realized that living in rooms with sooted walls and ceilings is not optimum for comfort. Therefore, all cooking takes place outside.

They carry their water... hm!

They’re bringing it from the basement! Whole buckets! Before my eyes, this water is poured into plastic jerrycans, which they have plenty of. All kinds and shapes, even some that were used for transporting chemicals…

Okay, one of the reasons they chose this particular house is clear.

I’ve heard of these backup water wells...

They’re a remnant of a time that’s long gone! It began before I was born.

Immediately after the war (in the fifties...) people who, presumably, remembered the Leningrad blockade, decided to establish backup water sources. Such wells were located in relatively protected places and were built to be operational even in case of some big ass fuckup. Kind of like the situation we find ourselves in…

The fact that there are such wells in Tarkov isn’t a secret, many people know about them. Even I’ve heard about them.

That’s why this freak circus has settled here…

Yeah, they’re not just gonna get up and leave! Nobody would! Free water is a tremendous resource! And you can trade with it, too!

One more reason why I can’t bring Gavrish or any other thugs here, they’ll be glad to take this gift and I’ll never get rid of them.

The conclusion is clear — I gotta work alone.

After spending several hours looking at a map, I come to the following conclusions. As a fortified position, this place is quite interesting, which is not surprising! It was built long enough ago, and one has to assume that the basement’s well was taken into account when constructing the building above it. This is not a residential building, it used to be the city archive. With time, as the city grew, space ran out and a new building was built. The old building was handed over to some company which turned it into a warehouse. They rented it out to anyone that needed and made a pretty penny on it. Of course, this didn’t go unnoticed by all manner of bad dudes: theft and even open robbery ran rampant. The house was further fortified with bricks in the windows and additional walls. A fence was built, with a gate and a checkpoint. A few canopies were installed in the yard to store even more goods.

But with time the building became inconvenient again, there was not enough space!

The warehouses moved out.

Seems the information on the well fell through the cracks around this time. In any case, after that there’s no longer any information on inspections by the city. Before that they visited regularly, once every six months.

For some time, the building was empty. The guards remained... but

nobody had any business there for quite a while.

All this information was relatively easy to find, all part of the public domain. One of our computers had a «quick reference» for the city's major buildings and urban facilities. Why the former owners needed it only God knows! But in this situation, for me personally, it came in handy and was quite timely!

There were also floor plans for the building. Unfortunately, the plans weren't updated after it was rebuilt into a warehouse. So their usefulness is… limited. But, at least it's something! Things like staircases are sure to be the same, obviously no one rebuilt them.

The building had no elevator, a street lift had been built with loading and unloading gates built into the wall on each floor. No one wants to drag boxes and wares on their back up and down the stairs. So I highly doubt that the slick traders would suddenly invest in the reconstruction and restructuring of stairwells. There's no point...

Okay, where will the current occupants be staying?

The leaders are definitely in the yard, there's a small building there. One has to assume that's where the management of the warehouse used to sit, there is even a small area for parking nearby. It's not that big, a big truck wouldn't be able to maneuver through there. So it's for cars. And it's unlikely that it was built for small cars that carried products! There was even a barrier at the entrance to the lot, this place was easily visible through the open gates. Obviously now there are no vehicles, and the barrier is open…

So, we know what the bosses' situation is, where does the rest of the infantry sleep?

Warehouse premises?

Not an option — the ventilation does not work, so it is very damp ...

It’s the same reason there’s no use building fires for heating and drying out the space: they would suffocate themselves immediately.

So that only leaves the first floor where there are many small rooms, formerly used by all manner of managers for the property.

And what is the conclusion?

We climb through the upper floor... there’s probably no one there.

***

Tolyan the Ear and Valerka the Red were on duty at the gate tonight. This eternally dumb pair once again managed to fuck up. Not majorly, they had managed to drop a crate full of bottles. Ten bottles of quality moonshine were lost.

The ruler in the newly formed «commune» of Scavs (this new formation has not yet earned the honorable title of a gang...) was Dimon the Murky. He became enraged and ordered the unlucky couple to sit night duty ten times in a row! And punched them in the face for good measure, as was common practice.

And now the two buddies were glumly huddling around the fire, trying to warm up. At night it gets really cold now. They were supposed to patrol the entire territory of the former warehouse, but guards had given up on that a while back. Anyone on duty preferred to sit by the fire instead of wandering around the yard for no good reason. Who, for the love of God, needed anything from this hole? Serious gangs and the remnants of private military are tied up in some sort of dispute, so they simply do not give a flying fuck about a bunch of Scavs. And Murky was smart enough not to spread the info on the well he found. Even the new moonshine “project» was kept under wraps. They found half a hundred bags of sugar in the warehouse and instead of selling them immediately, the former businessman started up a moonshine operation. He even chose to

sell it through merchants, reasonably coming to the conclusion that his group does not have enough strength and resources to work independently.

The word ‘group’ is even too grand! Three dozen armed ragamuffins were no match for any serious gang. Even darting a look at the BEARs was out of the question! The most sensible thing to do is sit quietly and gain strength. Water can be sold through the same merchants — unlike the sugar it wasn’t in any danger of running out. And there’s great demand for clean water! And it will always exist! This in and of itself is a means of long-term survival, if not prosperity.

Sure, it’s not grand. But it’s also basically a gift from God! Just recently these people were ecstatic when they found a single can of dog food, and now they have a roof over their heads, and a source of constant profit ... This is no longer meager survival, it’s a life!

But there still weren’t enough guns.

This problem was partially solved by ambushing lonely passersby. Having whacked (though not without losses) about a dozen people, Murky’s accomplices came into possession of a bunch of shotguns and a couple of assault rifles. And after quickly searching the bodies of private military officers after yet another skirmish (and ruthlessly killing the wounded), they even had ammunition. And although most of the weapons were taken by the winners of the battle, a few were left to be found by the Scavs. Several pistols and a handful of grenades were looted from miscellaneous bodies they found, and they even found a machine gun in a ditch! The ribbon was not empty, it had about half a hundred rounds of ammunition left.

Dimon had taken the biggest pistol. Even though there were only five bullets left, the hand cannon was impressive even before firing off a shot. It just looked mean! And the machine gun was always on the porch of the building he was based in. It was carried inside at night, so that no one got any ideas, like stealing it…

The «sentries» were given two hunting rifles with a couple of dozen rounds, which should be enough! The noise would get everyone else running. Or they'll run away, depends on how the chips fall, and on who's doing the attacking.

There were no innocent lambs in the group, and they didn't shy away from murdering a buyer who was naive enough to attempt to work with them directly. I mean, it's their own fault if they show up alone and without backup... Stupidity is incurable! The corpses were taken the next street over and dumped in a basement. About a dozen such suckers were already dumped there.

Tolyan the Ear muttered: "It's fucking cold! Goddamn fucking wind, fucking sucks!"

"So put on another log... it'll get warmer!" His partner responded, leaning his back on a wooden pallet. These were used as a barricade around the fire, and they also blocked most of the entrance gates.

The improvised «barricade» was supposed to inspire respect from visitors, but it was much better at protecting from the wind than from bullets. You can shoot through a half-inch board using a basic pistol, and more serious weapons would just shred it.

"I don't wanna go get it…"

"Just rip off a piece from the pallet," his comrade suggested.

"Murky will see in the morning. He'll yell, or worse!"

"Ha! Where do you think the firewood came fro, before? Don't be a pussy, everyone does it!"

"You do it then!"

As I listen to the guards fighting, I gently climb over the fence. I'm not jumping over the fence like they do in action movies or computer games. Who the hell knows what's on the other side? A stack of boards is a low-danger issue! Maybe a dog, it will bark... And if it's a pile of scrap metal, that's much more unpleasant... maybe the guards wouldn't even need to fire off a shot in that case.

So easy does it, I crawl. Or, more precisely, I roll. I was taught this trick in my time at the former warehouses of the Tarkov police department. I set up a board, climb carefully on to the ridge of the wall, attempting not to expose any part of my body too far up or to the side, and stretch out along the ridge. Lie down, freeze, look around. Or, better yet, listen! As some smart people have said, «there are no silent ambushes!»

So I lie down and listen…

I heard the guards arguing when I was approaching. I used them as reference of what's happening.

If there are any other posts around here, they're definitely not next to these chatterboxes. It's a decent-sized area, just two of them can't possibly keep an eye on everything, even if they try their little hearts out. So there's another post, or rather, I think there has to be one.

But after listening to the conversation, I realize there's no one else. I thought too highly of them.

And really, what good reason exists to try and get into this swamp? What is there that people can't live without?

Water?

Well... it's a necessity, for sure. But for now there are other sources of the precious liquid.

Moonshine?

What, is there gallons and gallons of it... No? So who gives a fuck?

In short, there's no need for 24-hour security for the warehouse dwellers. At least not yet.

Not yet... Well, I'll try to make sure that by the time the need arises, there won't be a chance or, most importantly, any desire to resist… Nor will there be any opportunity, that goes without saying.

So there's no one else…

Well, that's good!

Without breaking away from the fence, I gently try to slide down until I can hang on my hands and jump down. Quietly, gently, and if possible, without any noise.

Jump where?

I have a little LED flashlight... It has a low light setting, among other things. You can turn on a blue or red LED, which is not very visible from the sides. It's not too bright, but you can make something out a couple meters out.

Whoa!

On the ground…

I sit down and look around.

The silencer on the gun is ready, what if I meet someone? I can't restart my life from a save point!

No... everything is quiet…

I climb up carefully and pick out a rope hanging from above.

What for? There's no need to climb over the fence with a backpack on! I'm in no hurry.

All right, there's my backpack! Now I can put it on my back... no fences, so no climbing.

Of course, I don't head in the direction of the fire, there's nothing for me there. After making a pretty big detour, I circle the building to arrive at the back of the building I need. That's priority one, as they say in the military. At least, I heard that in some movie…

It takes me thirty minutes to get to the right locations. Slowly, I'm trying not to make any noise and am listening carefully.

The door's locked. Well, I guess that's to be expected, isn't it? They're dumb, but not that dumb.

I make no attempt to open it, but I do take a look at the porch… I've got a hunch.

Bingo!

I was right.

There's a hole in the floor before the front door, with an iron grate. In peacetime it was supposed to be used to wipe your shoes, so that the dirt would stay there and not be brought in. Some janitor would empty it regularly.

Well, messiness in our strange times is hardly a bother, so the hole is filled almost to the top.

Grate to the side, backpack on the floor.

I’m listening. I can still hear the barely audible voices from around the fire. The guards are on the location, they didn’t move…

From my backpack I take out an ordinary plastic shovel, I grabbed it from the kitchen. I carefully scoop the accumulated dirt and sand out from the grate. This shit goes in the bushes, and the tool disappears into the backpack yet again.

You know what’s good about plastic explosives?

«The fact that there’s a shit-ton in stock...» some would say, and they would be wrong! I mean sure, there’s a lot of explosives. I took almost five kilos from the container, and there’s more left! But it’s not just that.

It’s the fact that there is no need to craft some brick with extra tools, you can carefully mold a sausage of the desired diameter of the stuff with just your fingers. So I can shove it between the plates of the grate. And into this sausage I place a triggered fuse. It’s also very simple, designed to make sure that the door would hit it as it opened.

All right... here we go! Time to get out of here.

But I’m not going far, I have another target. Priority two, as the military would say.

And for that, I take a detour around the main building again, along the same route. There are two ways to get to the roof of the building. Inside, from the stairs on the fourth floor. And outside on the fire escape on the wall.

The second route is out of the question, you’d have to climb right in front of the guards. I don’t think they’re so bad at their jobs that they wouldn’t notice. And I’m not gonna try to get into the building. First of

all, because the entrance isn't far from the fire escape. Secondly, I have serious doubts that the front door is generously open for any and all visitors to come in at their leisure.

But!

There is a third way, I found it by studying the building's documentation.

Did I mention that there was a lift on the outside? It's a conventional I-beam structure attached to the wall of the house. It's got rails attached, and a regular flatbed slides along them. It looks like an ordinary elevator for building materials used in construction, which is probably exactly what it is. The platform is operated by a simple cable. An electric motor with a gearbox is located on the fourth floor, a booth made from welded iron sheets was built just for it. A meter by a meter and a half, more than enough for this equipment.

Now the flatbed is on the fourth floor, where, most likely, it will have to remain for as long as the building stands, since anything that might have needed to be unloaded from the warehouses is long gone.

How will I get there?

At first glance, I can't. There's no ladder, since there's no need for it. You can approach the electric motor booth by simply opening the door onto the loading bay. Not even the whole gate, there's a specially made hole in the gate.

Maybe I should just try to climb along the beams?

It's not very difficult, I'll say between us... And if you have a rope, it's plain easy!

The lift is located on the side of the warehouse, right across from the

management building. And it’s not visible from the gate right now.

I get up on the lower beam, throw the rope across the upper one.

It’s done.

On my belt is a standard harness, I’ve climbed with one just like it a few times before. Attached to it is a regular ascender.

At one time it was trendy to show off like that, Tarkov even had its own climbing wall. There were no mountains around obviously, so one of the outer walls of a shopping mall was remodeled into one. Imitation stones and other crap was attached, a rope “railing” was hung, a harness was installed and that’s it! Everybody climbed around on it... There were also instructors. For a small fee (although depending on the social standing of the client it might have been a decent sum) they taught this wisdom to anyone that wanted to learn.

And now look, it’s come in handy!

There was similar equipment in my warehouse, and I didn’t need much…

I pull up, walk on the crossing beam... and pull up again. And again…

Second floor, nice! Take off the rope, throw it over another beam.

Third…

Upon finally landing on the fourth floor platform, I lie still for a bit, recovering my strength. I collect the main rope and place it next to me. I’m not going to put it away just yet, it’ll come in handy.

I bend over, pull up my backpack that I left on the ground. It’s not really any fun to climb up the beams with weight on your back.

And now I can continue my hooliganism…

The door that leads to the floor didn’t open. Seems like it’s locked from the inside. Well, I’ll admit, I expected something that... It’s okay, that’s not really an obstacle. I climb into the booth that houses the motor. As expected, there’s plenty of room to lie down...

***

This day does not start out quite normally for the warehouse residents. Nothing major, the majority of the residents opened their eyes in the morning, puzzled by the daily issue they face — what will they eat? There is no permanent stock here at all, the very idea that something might not be used up immediately and saved for the next day was beyond the scope of most local residents. What you grab is what you immediately eat, and only that! Will tomorrow even come at all...

The hungry stomach is the most effective alarm clock. Stretching and scratching (very few of them remembered what a bath and shower even are...), the crowd spilled out into the street. And the hum of the voices reached the ears of the leader.

Dimon the Murky didn’t sleep in either. Calling on his personal bodyguard, Valya the Grave, he nodded in the direction of the machine gun that was stood up against the wall, signaling for Grave to take it.

Among the crowd of ragged, dirty dudes, the leader stood out due to being relatively well-groomed, since he had at least the opportunity to take a little care of himself. And what’s more important — he actually had the desire to not look like a complete bum.

And the presence of the big bodyguard also certainly played to his image. Although, let’s be real, what image can a Scav have?

Unlocking the bolt, Grave pushed the door firmly…

Dimon waited a bit to exit the building. That was deliberate. First, a gloomy bodyguard comes out, expressively waving the heavy machine gun. After that, Murky enters the street himself. It seemed to him that he looked more impressive this way.

But this time it saved his life…

Kablam-o!

The front door broke into tiny pieces!

Valya didn't even have time to make a noise, his rapidly separating body flew inside, knocking over the ringleader. And the machine gun flew off only god knows where…

The blast wave and concrete debris also hit the Scavs that were gathering. Nobody was killed, but many received small wounds, bruises, and bumps.

And what a panic broke out almost immediately...

Right away there appeared witnesses that claimed they saw someone throw something. No one with this view was deterred by the fact that chucking a grenade over the almost two-meter fence, and hitting a small point on a building that's a good half a hundred meters away is a hell of a trick!

Shots were fired, the guys happily shooting in the presumptive direction of the enemy. Although for some reason no one dared to run outside the gate…

They entered the building looking for Murky.

Found him, of course... shell-shocked and confused. They dragged him out, without thinking for even a second why they were doing that. What did they need to do that they couldn’t do inside?

At the same time, a box of canned meat was found in one of the rooms and dragged out of the building. And then, like magic, it evaporated almost instantly... and nobody knows where it went…

When he came to, the ringleader discovered that he was lying on a pile of stinking rags, and there was a crowd of his buddies yelling at each other. Basically, the whole discussion boiled down to the fact that Dimon should urgently be healed using moonshine. They couldn’t just decide yet how much «medicine» he would need. But a couple of bottles were already brought in, and someone had already had a taste…

Jumping to his feet, Murky used some choice curses to decry both the method of treatment and the so-called doctors around him. He generously smacked a couple of them on the head, made them take one bottle back to storage (the second one was already empty), and rushed to the house.

It took him a couple of minutes to realize that the explosive couldn’t have come from beyond the fence, anything with such power would not reach its target if thrown by hand!

Which means someone placed a mine right in front of his door, with their own hands…

The question is, who?!

The guards were called up, but they seemed sincerely convinced that no one had passed through the gate at night. Nor did anyone come out of the house…

“Then who did this? An ethereal spirit?” Dimon asked sarcastically.

“Well... fuck if I know... But there was no one! I swear!” cried Tolyan the Ear. “We didn’t sleep, cross our hearts! Nobody came through! Besides, I can’t even see your house from the gate... The fucking bush is in the way!”

So the innocent bush was ruthlessly trampled and removed immediately, like a herd of elephants had passed through!

However, the «thorough» search led to nothing — the unknown villain was nowhere to be found.

Among all this fascinating activity, Dimon had not forgotten what the real priority was. A team of Scavs, carrying cans of water, ventured in the direction of the nearest merchant. Searching for villains is important, but business must go on! They searched the building too, took a look out at the platforms and climbed onto the roof.

Some extra meticulous «detective» even pulled at the lock on the door of my «henhouse.» He couldn’t get it open, so he pulled the door and looked into the crack. But of course he did not see anything — I am not stupid enough to stand right in front of the door! I pressed myself against the wall next to the door, so I couldn’t be seen... But the lift motor, located on the floor, could be seen well. But it is of no interest in this case. Apparently satisfied with the result, the villain ran along.

“Your god is merciful,” I thought as I put my gun down…

But the door, judging by the speed of the villain’s retreat, probably remained unlocked. At least I heard the sound of the bolt unlocking, but there wasn’t another one that would indicate the door was locked.

Well... I’ll wait till tonight and see.

There was still some dumbass pointlessly running around downstairs. Let them have some fun down there... I'll rest for a bit. I don't think anyone's gonna come up all the way to the top again to check my box.

Why is there a lock? Maybe that's a reasonable question?

Actually, I set it up myself…

The logic is simple as ABC.

The building, including all the secluded corners, had to have been scoured ages ago. And this back room was searched for sure. And the lock was hung so that some enterprising individual wouldn't think about stealing the motor. Maybe it'll be used to power the elevator, for example…

The lock was hung in an interesting way. A cable goes across the door and through the hinges, and the lock is hanging on the cable. Somebody wanted to hang it like that... who knows why? But the door's locked! So the goal was achieved. But I can slip my hand out with the key easily…

By evening, the rushing around had stopped, and the people were tired. «Fucking fed up,» judging by the voices. On the way back, they successfully attacked and robbed someone, so there is a cause for celebration. Anyway, that's what was possible to gather from the scraps of conversations that reached my booth.

I'm lying on the floor, listening…

The building is quiet, the people have settled down. After their "righteous works" they must be tired…

Well, guys, I never promised you neither peace nor prosperity! And I don't promise them now either!

The door to the building was unlocked, as I expected. But it's naive to hope for luck in the future as well. So after I spend about an hour on some preparatory activities, I finally get to the stairs.
It's quiet and dark. It's okay, I have my night vision goggles with me... I carry them in my backpack for good reason!

Click, and in the greenish light I see the staircase heading down.

Oh, wow, I guess not all of them are total idiots in here!

There's a chair in the middle of the stairs, and there's a string heading somewhere…

No, there are no mines or stretch bombs, instead, there's an empty tin can at the end of the rope. An alarm device of sorts. Simple and tasteful!

I carefully walk around this structure, in my mind paying tribute to the unknown inventor — they have a decent head on their shoulders! Yeah, dude… wrong outlet for your talents…

I'm wary — who the fuck knows what else this little shit might have invented?

The third floor is empty.

The second floor...

Hmm, a locked gate across the stairs? Or-r-riginal! There's no way downstairs.

Why is that, by the way? Obviously, there must be a reason…

I found the answer quickly — there was a stack of boxes filled with bottles on the second floor.

Moonshine.

Or something like that, judging by the smell.

Hmm…

Someone very clever said repetition is the greatest teacher. This situation was very different, but a clever thought is always a clever thought!

And so I interrupt my search and head back to my backpack.

Remembering some of my... mmm... «tricks,» I have stockpiled some «medicine» in advance (no longer counting on a coincidence). Of course, it was difficult to hope for a repeat of the trick with everyone getting diarrhea. There I just spiked the only water tank... But, just in case, so to speak, I have some supplies.

I load about three dozen bottles before I run out of supplies and stomp downstairs.

No, I can’t open this lock... I can’t saw it, it’ll make noise and there’s definitely going to be evidence left. Let’s not «pull on Death’s whiskers.» I think that’s what Kipling wrote? I can jump down from the second-floor lift platform.

Chapter 3

Murky made the right call from what he saw — now, the night guards would wake him up in the morning every day. In case they miss another situation, they'll pay dearly and immediately. If they miss something, they'll just get blown up themselves!

The door to the house was repaired as best the locals could… meaning, they just hung a new door from one of the storage rooms. It's good that they're all one size…

A new bodyguard was appointed immediately, and the old one was quickly buried. It's a pity that the machine gun was hopelessly warped by the explosion... but that's okay, there'll be a new one!

With these thoughts, Dimon fell asleep.

But he woke up himself, nobody else did at the agreed upon time. A look at his watch... and a minute later he was yelling at his bodyguard — enough sleep! He should have been up half an hour ago! Someone is gonna get punished!

But... how do they get out?

The new bodyguard wasn't in a hurry to die and so he wasn't in a hurry to open the door. Fuck knows if there's some explosive shit there again?

But the ringleader could not stay in the house — this inevitably undermined his authority (already not absolute...). Something had to be decided, and quick!

So they had to climb through the window. Not Murky, of course, the bodyguard. He then opened the door, upon making sure that there weren't any tricks.

The ringleader headed for the gate in fury. Well, sleepyheads... just you wait!

But alas…

All the authority Dimon had would not be enough to cause them even the slightest trouble. And it wasn't due to the Scav pack leader's lack of authority, no one could.

The men that were in front of the gate parted, letting the leader through.

Both men on duty sat with their backs to the fence.

Hopelessly dead, already cold. And their weapons, like a cruel joke, were carefully placed next to them. They were empty, and a small pile of ammo had been placed inside one of the dead men's hats. They didn't take anything…

"This... how did it happen?" Murky asked, shocked.

"Who the fuck knows... This morning we came out, and they were here," answered one of the Scavs.

Both guards were shot, there were obvious marks from a gun. But no one heard any gunshots.

Why not?

The leader squatted down to get a better look at the bodies. And he noticed a detail…

There's an interesting object at an equal distance from the two bodies. And, as if to make sure it's noticed, the hands of both dead men were pointing in its direction.

“What the hell is this?” Dimon lifted a pistol cartridge from the ground. “Who knows?”

An ordinary 9x19 cartridge... nothing special... But why was it placed (not dropped, neatly placed!) in such a way that it would definitely be noticed?!

Silence.

“Well…” One of the tramps coughed. “I heard something…”

“What?!” The ringleader abruptly turned to him.

“Well... some gangsters were talking at the merchant’s place… And I heard!”

“Just spit it out already!”

“So... this is the Predator’s sign!”

“What do you mean?” Dimon wasn’t getting it.

“You see the bullet? It’s blue... That’s what the Predator uses... and his people too…”

“Who’s that? Where’s he from, who does he work for?”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “No one knows who he is. But the rumor was that he’s a horribly cruel man! He can get anywhere and kill anybody! Have you heard of Foma?”

Murky cringed, the old bandit ruined the Scav’s lives quite a lot! He’s a tough and cruel man!

“Who hasn’t heard of him?! So what?”

“He’s fucking dead! Killed right at home! And his guards couldn’t save him, everybody else died along with him! Almost two dozen people!”

“Fuck him! Someone killed him, and the air’s cleaner for it! What does this Predator have to do with that?”

The tramp smiled.

“That’s how he got dead! He even tried to go on the offensive! He made him an ulta... ulti… an ultimatum! And he demanded money... a million bucks! So instead he got a whole handful of these bullets…”

The loud crowd of tramps became quiet at once — the time for jokes was over! A lot of people have heard who Foma was. And those who were lucky enough to get away from his boys absolutely did not want to meet them again. It was clear that no one was sad over the death of the gangster leader, but to find here, in his place, an unambiguous reminder from the person that killed him… It’s really not fun any way you look at it.

“Tell me... what did this guy need here?”

“How would I know?” The storyteller shrugged his shoulders, clearly flattered by the public’s attention. “He seems to be driving us away... nothing else I can think of. You decide, but I’m going! I’d rather hide in some basement alone and live longer! Maybe my belly won’t be as full, but I’ll be alive longer, that’s for sure!”

Immediately, an incredible ruckus broke out. It was completely unclear who was trying to convince who of what. As a result of the altercation, several people, having taken their meager possessions (the ones they managed to scrounge up), left the territory of the warehouses, swearing and mumbling before dissolving in the shadows of the adjacent streets.

Upon restoring relative order, the ringleader sent another shipment of water and moonshine to the trader and began organizing security.

It was completely unclear who was sneaking in and out of the guarded territory. One thing was clear — they showed up at night and somehow climbed over the fence. It was extremely unlikely that the guest passed through the gate, but just in case this post had been further reinforced. A few more people stood at the corners of the territory, tasked to be on the lookout.

They tried to make all the passages as difficult as possible, placing all kinds of junk around and leaving only narrow paths between the rubble.

The work was completed only late in the evening, and after a quick snack (the ringleader even allocated a couple of bottles of his own product), they fell asleep.

In the morning Murky looked out the window with fear.

But nothing unpleasant had happened last night! No one fired at the posts, or laid a mine on the trail. Meaning, their measures had worked! Although, about fifteen tramps could barely stand on their feet after their sleepless night…

Again the work started, and an hour later another caravan left for the trader. This business is important and urgent!

Alas... the importance of doing business properly was recognized by Dimon only closer to the evening, when his caravan returned.

Unarmed and with bruises on their wrinkled faces.

“Who the hell did this to you?” The ringleader was shocked.

“The trader! He called on some bandits, so they beat us up... And they took our guns!”

“What for?!”

“For the moonshine!”

The confused men managed to tell the story. Upon trying the «product,» one of the trader’s friends immediately shit himself. Right away, like he was a rocket! The trader turned out to be a smart man, called for the bandits, and they quickly brought him the dozen Scavs that brought the booze. And each of them was offered a free drink. Not much time passed before a couple of people rushed to the toilet quickly. They were shitting like rockets too...

“So they beat us up…” the one telling the story said before spitting blood on the sand. “They said we’d gotten off easy with only our guns and a beating. Our luck was that less than half a dozen of the bottles were like that... By the way, they won’t take any more water from us either. They say the fuck knows where you’re pumping it from…”

Business is in grave danger.

Okay... there are other traders around here... but the simple fact of this issue! Who did it?!

Murky didn’t want to reinvent the wheel. He decided to use a method that was tried and true.

The result was clear in a couple of hours.

Five tramps lined the bushes behind the fence, shitting furiously, and on the table in front of the ringleader were several bottles with suspicious contents. At first glance, and even upon being smelled, it seemed like common moonshine. And yet…

And the bottles were all from different crates!

And now what... Bottle caps were very different from each other — some were just pieces of wood. So understanding at what stage the laxative ended up in the moonshine is an unsolvable task!

One thing is clear — they were «loaded» either before being placed into boxes (but how?!), or on the way to the trader. But this is unlikely... the chance to be beaten (or worse...) was too great in this case…

“Looks like we got a snitch here…” one of the tramps suggested.

“So how do we find him now?” The ringleader shrugged his shoulders. “No, I’m not saying it’s impossible... but we don’t have an HR department! Nor a priest to have a heart-to-heart conversation with everyone…”

“So maybe he’s... gone already? Almost a dozen people left along with Crook, they could have been among them easily!”

Yes, they could... it’s at least a possible scenario…

But, if that’s the case…

The leader started some vigorous activity.

He again inspected the warehouse premises, jerked at every door. Some of them had all kinds of garbage piled in front of them so that they was impossible to open. These places were of no use yet, there was nothing to go there for. And on the gate that led upstairs they hung another lock, the key to which Dimon put in his pocket, patting it for all to see.

In addition to all that, he implemented some, let’s say, quality control.

From each moonshine bottle, just before it was sent out, one of the porters had to take a chug. And they were even supposed to write down from which one! And if someone shit themselves on the way to the trader… Although, to be fair, no one had anything against this approach to quality control!

***

It’s evening.

Upon personally inspecting all the posts, Murky was confident that no one was asleep. He promised to personally take the head off any man that fell asleep at his post, and warned that he’d check at night too!

And after that he at last went to bed…

As far as checking, he wasn’t kidding. At 3:00 a.m., one of the bodyguards woke him up.
“It’s time…”

Trying not to make any noise, they repeated the same procedure. Go out the window, look at the porch, open the door quietly…

At the gate everything was fine, the guards were awake, staring into the dark. Promising them a replacement shift soon, the ringleader and the guards walked along. This patrol was simple — walk along the fence around the territory, go into the main building and wake up the next shift. And see how the checkpoints along the way are faring... Perhaps even someone else could have done this, but Dimon just couldn’t sleep calmly then. He knew his people well... Those who were smart were already with the bandits and private military. He was left with the most useless, pitiful dregs of society. And they had a clear preference for lazy work. If there is a chance they didn’t have to bother with something, they would surely take it! No... if you want something done right, do it yourself! Besides, he

had to strengthen his authority…

Next post.

When he heard footsteps coming, the guard hid behind a bunch of empty boxes and poked the barrel of his gun out from behind them.

“Who goes there?!”

«He’s awake!» The ringleader grinned with approval.

“Don’t worry about it!” one of the bodyguards said softly. “We’re on your side.”

With a pat on the guard’s shoulder, Murky moved on. Hmm, they’re actually working! If things go on like this, it might even be feasible to approach a gang... make an offer, so to speak…

The next guard was supposed to be on the side of the warehouse building with no windows. Passing the cage for the lift, the crowd turned a corner. Another 50 meters…

“Well, where is he?” The ringleader’s squinting. “Is the motherfucker sleeping?”

Silence... Just something squeaking to the side. No footsteps, no movement, no breathing... nothing at all. Hell, even if he’s asleep... but he has to breathe?!

“Biggie, Forrester, check it out!” Dimon even unbuttoned his holster, showing determination. Now this sleepyhead will be dragged back here, and his awakening will not be pleasant!

The bodyguards, readjusting their weapons, moved into the dark.

A minute passes.

Another one…

No one.

What the hell?!

“Come on, let’s all go in there!” Murky, pulling out his trophy gun, took a decisive step forward.
After walking a few meters, one of the remaining bodyguards almost tripped over something.

“What the fuck...» The bodyguard remembered well that there was nothing lying on the ground, all man-made obstacles were further in, and this part of the territory was left clean so the guard could see anyone that risked climbing over the fence. And yet, something was under his feet!

“Fuck it!” the bodyguard thought, as he pulled out his flashlight and switched it on.

This object, it must be said, received a certain amount of attention from his fellow thugs. The once fashionable «eternal» flashlights, charged by shaking the device back and forth, were now almost nowhere to be found, so the demand for them was constant. The thing turned out to be surprisingly useful. And under the current conditions even more so. No batteries needed, just shake.

In the dim spot of light on the ground was the obstacle — the body of one of the Scavs that had gone ahead. Judging by the fact that blood was pouring out with some pressure, it was safe to assume that nothing could help him anymore. If he wasn’t dead now, he would be soon enough, he just wouldn’t survive this kind of blood loss for long. And even if he’s bandaged up, what to do next? Drag his ass to a doctor? What fucking doctor?! All decent doctors only worked with influential gangsters or even big gangs. You try knocking on their

door…

“Lights out!” Dimon finally chose a tactic.

But it’s too late!

Hiss, bang…

This time, the sound was heard by many.

The flashlight fell on the ground, rolled, illuminating the fence, then some boxes... Then it stopped, hitting an as yet unseen obstacle. The beam was staring in the direction of the sky.

And the previous owner of the flashlight was already rolling on the ground, spewing curses and shouting loudly.

“Oh, you fucking bitch! You’ll burn in hell for this…”

No one heard the second shot, but the loud cursing was replaced by a soft wheezing. Seems the shooter was more accurate the second time…

Everybody ran about a hundred meters, arriving near the gate. They hit the ground, pointing their barrels of varying caliber in the direction they came from. The worried guards near the gate, not having even enough time to put out the fire, hurriedly moved in various directions into the dark. No one wanted to stay in the light, who the fuck knows what these night villains had in mind…

“We have to retreat to the warehouse…” one of the tramps finally spoke up. “The doors are strong on that building!”

“Yeah… and who’s going to risk opening them for you now?” One of Murky’s personal guards replied. “Who the fuck knows who’s gonna follow us through that door? Would you take that chance?”

But there was nothing else to do. No one dared go to the formerly cozy administrative building. There were no lights, and some monster hiding on the way could shoot everyone easily. As it turned out, the darkness was not a hindrance to him.

“All right!” Dimon finally caught his breath. “We’re breaking through to the warehouse!”

How they got there, no one remembered. On the way one of the guards fell away. Perhaps somebody even heard him scream... Who the fuck cares! Your own skin is more valuable!

A stroke of luck, the door was open almost immediately — probably someone had to take a leak, so they were up at this late hour.

But they didn’t have time to close the door, the last one trying to get inside was shot in the back and collapsed right on the doorway, and the door that opened outward was now blocked by the body. The first attempt to pull or push the body led to another tramp taking a bullet in the arm. The wounded man, cursing his heart out, was pulled aside, and no one else risked approaching the door. They pulled back and took aim at the corridor, so that all the advantage was on the defensive side. Walking along it under the sights of a dozen and a half guns, now that would be quite something!

That was the end of it, no one ever tried to break through. The occupants of the warehouse, in turn, prudently stayed inside.

Losses were only calculated in the morning. It was already dawn, and the area was visible from the roof, where the tramps went at dawn. When the lookout team didn’t see anybody, they gave a sign that everyone could exit!

Four dead, and again the same handwriting! The guns were not taken! Also two wounded. One of them, oddly enough, was the

missing guard. He was wounded in the leg, as it turned out. He couldn’t run anymore, so he tried to hide.

But, strangely enough, he somehow managed to bandage himself up and even looked relatively okay! He refused to answer any questions from his companions and demanded a personal conversation with the ringleader.

Well... if you’re so mysterious…

The guard was dragged to Murky’s house.

“And what did you want to say?” the leader said, giving him a mean stare.

“Everyone else should leave…”

The door slammed behind the last bodyguard. It must be said, the number of people that wanted this job has dropped significantly by the morning. As it turned out, this job didn’t guarantee any safety or even longevity. So why take the risk?

“Well?” After seeing the last person leave, Dimon turned to the wounded man.

“I saw him…»

“Who?”

“The Predator.”

“What do you mean?” The ringleader wasn’t getting it.

“I got hit in the leg, so I tried to crawl to the crates... But he found me there too!”

“How did he find you?”

“He sees everything... and without any devices, too!”

“You’re shitting me…” Dimon said nervously.

“I was looking up at him! The sky is starry, I could see his silhouette clearly. There was nothing on his head!”

“Well…” the ringleader scratched his chin, full of doubt.

“Unless he put it on later... but I didn’t see it.”

“And how did it go?”

“Well, I tried to crawl back, and that’s where he found me. He poked me in the back with his gun and whispered to drop mine. I still had a knife, so I threw it. And then he gave me a dressing bag, threw it right in at my feet. He said, ‘Get bandaged, I won’t rush you.’”

“Why would he do that?”

The guard shifted around on his elbows to lay down more comfortably.

“Predator even injected me with something, and I immediately felt better! He said he didn’t want me to croak right there. He gave me some pills, too…”

Dimon choked — all this didn’t fit with the overall picture. Shoot several people easily to treat one of them later? What the fuck for? Something obviously didn’t add up…

“He said we crossed his path. And that he didn’t usually forgive that.”

“But... how?!”

“I don’t know... he didn’t say…”

“So what? Are we supposed to kill ourselves here now?!”

Instead of answering the guard reached behind his back.

“Here…”

On his palm was a dark gray rectangle, a walkie-talkie.

“It’s locked, you can only use one channel. From ten to two. You don’t have to wait for an answer, they record everything. If they don’t say anything at once, they will the next day... or the day after that... But they will answer for sure.”

The leader turned the walkie-talkie in his hands.

“How do I charge it?”

“The charger is in another pocket, I can’t reach it. And as for the electricity, he said it was your issue. If you want to, you’ll find it. The traders have everything.”

The wounded man was taken away, and Murky sat down at the table. He poured himself a glass of moonshine, drank it without a chaser and started thinking…

The Predator, or whoever made all this trouble here tonight, could have calmly shot us all, by now Dimon had no doubt about it. It didn’t matter how he could see in the dark, but he could! Why didn’t he shoot them…

And really, why? If the ringleader were in his place, he wouldn’t even think about it! Suppose all the tramps here were multiplied by zero, what next? He was turning this situation and its possible

consequences in his mind, and nothing really came to him. But he had to know! All he probably had to do was push the button on the radio and ask specific questions. Questions that would need to be answered... and how? What should he say? And there's no one to even ask, he's surrounded by fucking scumbags and assholes!

Okay...

The ringleader looked longingly at the bottle and put it aside. He needed to have a sober (well, at least relatively...) mind to conduct such negotiations.

'Click' went the volume knob. On the front panel there was a paper glued with tape.

«Your callsign is Carrier," it said.

Short and clear.

The same tape was used to tightly fix the other wheel that would normally switch between channels, so that no one would get any ideas.

"Um... Carrier here... Can anybody hear me?"

Silence.

Just static from the speaker.

After waiting for a minute or two, Dimon repeated his words again.

It's quiet again…

Crap!

You need to press something on there!

Here, there's a big button on the side…

The ringleader hurriedly pressed it and repeated the phrase again. Then let go…

"I hear you."

Dry, short, as if it wasn't even a person talking.

"Well…" Murky was a little confused. "I was told to get in touch…"

"You did. We're listening to you."

"So... what do you want from us?"

"From you?" The invisible voice on the line was a little surprised. "What can you do, anyway? Something that would suit management."

Management? What the fuck…

"They said the Predator would be on the line."

"He will receive word of your request."

And what fucking request? Who the fuck knowns who's sitting by the radio?

"We're... We're ready to do... Well, what they tell us to."

"Wait for an answer. Do not turn off the radio."

The stunned ringleader placed the radio on the table. And he drank another shot, otherwise his mind couldn't think straight.

They’re not just fairy tales, it turns out! There’s a dark figure out there! What the hell is that supposed to mean? He walked around the room nervously.

Leave this place once and for all? Perhaps... in any fucking case they couldn’t hold on to it by themselves anymore. Okay, we leave... and then what? Live on what? The troop is gonna run all over the place then.

“Carrier!” the loudspeaker spoke calmly.

“It’s me!”

“You have this facility assigned to you. It is your duty to protect the water source. Be ready to provide the requested amount of water within 24 hours after the call comes. You’ll be told a location. You can sell the extra water to the traders, that’s your official cover. Select a group of five people. The stronger ones. And armed. They’ll deliver on our orders. Write down the address…”

Ten minutes later Dimon carefully turned off the radio and placed it on the table.

So... he has to get his head together somehow…

“Baldy!”

Stomping feet, and the guard’s head slipped through the door.

“Huh?”

“Bring ten men over here!”

Twenty minutes later Dimon was walking in front of the assembled group.

“So! I talked it over with someone…” He shook a piece of paper in the air. “Now we’re walking to this address! There’s gonna be a package in the apartment... bring it here immediately. And also! Have a look around, we don’t need extra eyes on all this! If we see anybody, kill them right away! Also! Stay out of the package, it’s got a bomb that goes off if tampered with! That’s why you carry it with care…”

He knew he was putting literally everything at risk right now. If the package isn’t there... he might not even make it to the fence. But the alternative was being glumly holed up in some moldy cellar, and Murky didn’t want that anymore!

“Come on, get to it! It’s gonna get dark soon, for fuck’s sake!”

Well, it was quite a bit before dark... but the ringleader was reasonably afraid that by evening their ranks might be significantly thinner, people might not want to worry about living through another such night. Who gives a fuck about a lonely Scav? No one... But here someone actually attacked them!

It’s been an hour…

Two.

“Baldy! Where’s the boss?!”

The boss jumped out on to the doorstep.

There were tramps coming through the gate. Not empty handed, a crate of some kind... and a tarpaulin bag…

He opened the parcel personally, and not because he was some great specialist. The radio clearly explained the sequence of operation, Murky even wrote it down!

«So... here, on the wire is a threaded bolt, we take it off... And where's the hole? Here, in the middle, number 3…»

After inserting the bolt, the ringleader held his breath. Should he open it?

When he looked up from the box, he saw a couple dozen eyes watching him closely. There's no turning back…

The locks clicked, the lid squeaked on the hinges.

He saw the grenade immediately in the center of the box, closer to the back wall. Now the lever of the safety mechanism was securely fixed by the bolt inserted into the hole.

"Baldy! Come here…"

The bodyguard, who served in the army back in the day, identified the grenade immediately and volunteered to make sure it wouldn't accidentally go off. He leaned over and gently pulled it out of the box.

"We'll stick a wire in the hole, and everything will be top-notch!"

The ringleader raised the oiled paper when his bodyguard was around the corner…

"All right! Whoever went for the package, come to me!"

The first person to come up received a pump shotgun and two packs of ammo. Three more got assault rifles, new ones! KS, police edition, God's gift! And three magazines each…

A dozen pistols quickly dispersed into the hands of the new owners. And two imported automatic rifles went to the bodyguards. There was still ammo in the box, but Murky decided to save it for later.

There shouldn’t be any nasty surprises in the bag, but he’d been spellbound with it for five minutes.

Army rationing! Twenty boxes! Three dozen cans of imported food, bandages... two tin cans with a simple inscription — «Medical Alcohol»! This was greeted with jubilation by all.

A cardboard box with a solar charger for the radio station, Murky pocketed it right away.

Two bags with a red cross, nothing to explain here.

“All right, listen to me, everyone! I made a deal with the Predator!”

Someone even choked from surprise.

“There’s no more misunderstanding! This place is ours!”

Not exactly... but why explain?

“The gift is from him. There’s more coming, he’s apologizing…”

«My God, what am I saying?! And if he hears about this?!”

“We keep things going here, the traders will take our water. That’s to keep our pants on, so to speak... And there’ll be other things to do!”

The crowd met this news with an approving roar. Not everybody really believed it... but guns and food seems like a very convincing argument.

“Get a case of moonshine from the warehouse! Five rations — open them! And the same amount of meat too! Fuck it, let’s party!”

Chapter 4

Okay, the Scavs at the former warehouse have been dealt with, sort of. They're not my headache anymore. They're scared, and they're not gonna do anything unnecessary anymore. And I certainly won't go broke because I gave them a few guns and some ammunition, as well as some food. Hell, if I gave them ten times as much, I'd still be good.

But now this very warehouse can (and hopefully will) become an obstacle for anyone that wants to explore this area. Scavs tend to be a watchful bunch. They'll try to take a bite of any uninvited guest themselves. They likely won't do much damage, but any intruder will be distracted. Besides... I have some other ideas... but that's for later.

Now it's time to pay a courtesy visit to Khokhol. Chat about life, and he had some news, too…

They met me warmly, maybe not with open arms, but their attitude was respectful enough. I wasn't acting like a dick, putting my nose up or behaving arrogantly. "Be simple and people will like you!" That's a truth I learned a long time ago, and I've used this advice many times. It doesn't work with everybody... but it does with a lot of people!

"Cognac?" the merchant asked as he winked at me.

Who could say no... this delicious drink is always a good idea!

He also paid me my dues, a lot of stuff has been sold, so my pocket is full. And at the same time, Khokhol told me the news. Boar… yes, that shouldn't be put off, you really shouldn't turn down invitations from these kinds of people.

“Get in touch with him. Tell him I’ll be there the day after tomorrow. You understand, I have to report to the boss first.”

The trader nods, he gets it.

“Will you take the ammo now?”

The consignment notes in the container state there’s about 1,500 of those «blue» bullets.

“I’ll take a dozen packs. Some people will come for some other goods…They’ll say they’re from the Carrier. Don’t be surprised when you meet them, sometimes my boss has some strange ideas... even I’m sometimes left scratching my head, with both hands at once. By the way, take a close look at those guys when they come, maybe you can use them for something, too? The boss is strict with them, so they should come in handy!”

“I’ll take a look…” the man shrugs. “Life is complicated, you shouldn’t dismiss anything out of hand.”

After placing the night vision device in my backpack (from the same container), I warmly say goodbye to everyone present. The NV is some very expensive tech, so the trader only puts a couple on sale at a time. It’s a scarce thing, hard to get... that’s why, by the way, the price is quite high, and only going up.

At the nearest checkpoint of the Gavrish gang, only one acquaintance was present, but this was more than enough! No idle chat: I was immediately assigned three escorts.

The ringleader, it seems, was frankly pleased to see me. Instead of a greeting I place the night vision device on the table.

“The chief said give it to you. Said you’d find a use for it…”

David Copperfield himself would be impressed with how the device just evaporates without a trace! As if it had never been there…

“Shall we have a drink? To celebrate our meeting!”

“Do you have any cognac?”

They have a whole box, they’ve been prospering, it seems!

The boss complains that it’s hard to get supplies! Shops and warehouses are all almost empty. And there’s not much to find in apartments, either…

“And where can this stuff be found?”

The port is clearly the best option... But there’s plenty of smart guys there. Getting into that hornet’s nest…

Well, he does not need to tell ME that!

“I know, I was recently there helping Boar get some stuff out. Definitely not easy, though it was worth it... But going there a second time... fuck that!” I shake my head. “I can find an easier way to commit suicide.”

Ataman purses his lips in disappointment.

“Well... there’s other options too…”

He explains that his guys managed to dig up some information... But he’s at a loss about what to with it.

“There’s a tricky mechanism there, you need somebody smart. Well, someone who’s into computers and shit. That’s definitely not us!”

So, if I know anything about this, does the boss suggest we

collaborate?

“That’s where they were coming from!” Gavrish nods at the road that leads to, among other places, the coast. “Three escort cars and an armored vehicle, like the ones they once used to transport money to and from a bank. That’s where they were stopped... that’s also where they died.”

The ruined carcasses of the cars rise above the intersection like an abstract sculpture. The smell of burning is faint, and I can’t smell rotting flesh at all. Dogs, I’m guessing…

“But somebody must have made it out, since USECs came here soon after. There were two groups of them. One of them is lying over there somewhere, they had a clash with some BEARs. The second group showed up later and were careful. We saw them from afar, but we didn’t let them know that we saw them.”

“Why is that?”

“The armored car had a safe in it, half the size of the car! But nobody had a key, we looked through all the bodies.”

The bodies? Wonder whose? Those who were lying here, or those who were supposedly pinned down by BEARs? Oh, sly boss man! There’s something he’s clearly not saying…

“Did you try blowing it up?”

“Our specialist said that it was pointless, then nothing inside would survive. The design is tricky, there’s a special charge inside. Just try to break it, and the contents are toast! Only a special key can open it. You even need more than one.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are two keys. One opens the outer door, the other opens some kind of special inner vault. And you have to open both in five minutes, otherwise…”

“Oh, I see. From the way you’re describing it, you found the keys. And you figured out the order they’re supposed to open in, too.”

Gavrish smirks

“Well, we’re not total idiots here, are we?”

There are grey plastic boxes with SSDs on the table. Each has a label with a complex code.

“And what’s this?”

The ataman scratches the back of his head.

“So this kid... proficient in all this stuff... Anyway, he managed to read part of it.”

“Well, let’s get him in here and have a chat!”

The chat won’t happen. The specialist, as it turns out, laid his life down in an unsuccessful attack before he could finish his investigation. He didn’t find much before then. His records are laid out on the screen of his laptop.

Somewhere in the city are several information centers (that’s something we’ve known without the notes…) where information from various CCTV cameras around the city flowed. The disks being transported were an archive of these very records.

Alas, their real value, after so much time, is miniscule. I tell my companion that and a grim look falls over his face.

“Then why did the USECs let so many people die over this?”

That’s a good question!

But I have no answer.

“So... maybe you could work on it?”

“Like I don’t have anything else to do?”

“But there’s clearly something valuable there!”

I shrug — it’s quite possible that there is. But it’ll be ages before we find this valuable thing…

“Okay, I’ll report to the boss... But you realize, the answer could go either way. High probability he tells you to go fuck yourself…”

“Of course!”

We cement this arrangement with cognac.

***

Boar.

He hasn’t changed much since we last met, and why should he? He’s still meticulous and weighs every word he says.

“Your boss is being looked at by underground dwellers. Why, I don’t know. But they need you, too, and they’ve got big issues with you.”

“I can understand that, we didn’t hug and kiss nicely when we last met. But I did hurt them, yeah.”

“Watch your step, they’re not very nice guys.”

“What’s your role in this business?”

The gang leader shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, but we’re impartial. They stay out of our way, so we stay out of theirs. But we’re not going to help them, that’s for sure. But I have a request for you.”

“Lay it out.”

“I don’t want you to have a fight in our territories.”

“So you’re already there too?” I say, pointing my finger at the floor.

“No,” Boar shakes his head. “We have nothing to do with their dungeons. But try not to tear anything up in their dungeons, either, or I’ll be sad! Otherwise, who knows, maybe some house will suddenly fall underground? And my guys might be in there!”

“Well, that we can do without! Imagine an explosion like that... how much dynamite I would need!”

“That’s settled then!” The bandit stands up.

I get up and we shake hands.

“You guys are a risky bunch!” He shakes his head. “Managed to spit in a lot of people’s soup!”

***

“He left the trader,” a faint voice says in the headphones. “Similar to the description. He’s the same height. He had a hat on, so couldn’t make out the color of his hair.”

“What’s he armed with?” the voice on the other side inquires.

“He’s holding a full auto shotgun. ‘Vepr’ or ‘Saiga,’ can’t make it out from here. There’s an assault rifle of some sort on a belt behind his back. It looks small. Backpack... A combat vest, like USECs have. A knife on his belt... two knives! Can’t see anything else.”

“Copy that, we’re moving out. Keep track of his movement.”

“Roger…» The man in the dark coat carefully looked out the window. He brought the radio close to his mouth again. “He’s heading for the five-story building, the gang checkpoint is to his right. There are bushes, we risk losing sight of him.”

“It’s fine, post number three will pick him up.”

***

God knows why, but after talking to the Boar, I was uneasy. He didn’t seem to say anything too unpleasant... but some thought was buzzing…

What’s wrong?

At a certain moment I turn to the entrance of a building. There’s nothing special about it, most of the apartments have long been scoured by the Scavs or Gavrish’s bandits. But I’m not looking for anything.

The second floor…

Four, that’s it, we’re not going any higher.

I dive into one of the apartments. It’s completely ruined, even the balcony door is off the hinges for some reason. Feel sorry for the old owner, looks like he was a man that liked to hang out at home. He

even built a closet on the balcony. It's empty now too, and the doors have been ripped off. And the back wall is torn off for some reason. However, because of this, a big hole was created... By the way, big enough for a man to get through! Which is what I do. And I even get my backpack through!

Where to, you might ask?

To the next balcony, where else?

As it happened, some unknown villains had broken the bottom of the balcony door. It looks like it's closed from the street. But in reality, you can enter the room. Of course I had to use such a gift and a couple minutes later I'm standing at the locked door, listening to the stairs.

Quiet... no one is making any noise yet. There's broken glass scattered on the stairs to the second floor, so no one can pass silently.

What did the teachers at the police warehouse say?

«A group of saboteurs infiltrated an enemy facility and created a well-organized mess…»

Not every mess (or what looks like one at first sight) is really a mess. Sometimes it can be messy on purpose…

But broken glass on the floor is a common thing in Tarkov! Wind, bullet, or rock — who's going to think twice about it?!

No, I can't hear anything.

The door is locked.

You can even push it, it still won't open. Not right away, in any case...

But not because it’s locked. The lock’s been broken for a while now.

It’s just a nail going through the door and into the wall, inserted in a hole drilled in it. If you don’t squat down, it’s almost impossible to see, the top is hidden under the torn upholstery.

But that’s all outside, and I’m inside now! What am I gonna do?

Simple — there’s another nail on the floor... and if you put it in the hole under the wallpaper, it will push out its brother. All you need is knowledge of where to put it.

I knew this... Because I built this whole contraption myself a while back.

Fifth floor.

If you look under your feet, there’s an inconspicuous wire stretched across the open door. There’s no stretch bombs here, instead it leads to a pile of household items on the floor. Judging by the absence of blood on the floor and items, no one has found this place yet, since anyone that trips on the wire would fall face first into the pile.

Some might say it’s not nice! They might say I’m an evil man!

But I object, I could have placed a grenade on this wire! And yet I didn’t…

No one appreciates my kindness.

Okay, I’m gonna carefully step over the wire... careful not to hit it... and into the room.

I press against the wall and look out carefully.

At first glance, everything seems to be okay. No one's storming the house or waving their guns in the air. But I don't think there's any more fools like that left in this town.

A thermal sight comes out of the backpack. Couple of seconds, and it's attached to the Zig. There's even a special place for it, engineers have thought ahead.

So, what do we have here?

My gut didn't let me down, there are a lot of worthwhile things to look at!

The first person was located in the bushes. To the side and across the street was the second. He was looking out of the third-floor window.

The third... or actually third and fourth. The two of them were quietly sneaking up to the entrance. They tried their best not to make any noise and not make their presence known in any way.

That's it, huh?

Guys... I was expecting more attention to my person for some reason! Not just some amateurs, but a real villain! Although I am more of a villain in the eyes of others than I am in reality, but still…

One lookout on the third floor, one shooter as backup and only two storming the building? Not just killers, the lookout could have shot at me as I was walking down the street. So this couple's not planning to kill me outright, either.

On the other hand, what makes me think there's only two of them? I saw these two, and in reality there could be many more. Approach from the other side, for example...

In the meantime, the pair dived into the entrance I came through. Now there's no doubt these guys are here for me.

I put my eye to the sight of the submachine gun, line up the sighting marks…

It's less than 50 meters, no adjustments required.

The bolt ejects the spent casing. The silhouette in the scope slowly falls to the side.

God knows who the fuck he was. Some regular Scav, a gangster, or anyone, it doesn't matter one bit. They came for me, and that's reason enough. They may need me alive for some reason, but how alive is a different question! Being alive is not the same as being whole! Maybe they just need me to be able to talk.

This thought makes me sweat a little.

From my position, I could see him, but that's about it. The other dude did not show up well enough in the sights, so I had to crawl into another room. But even from there I could only take him out with the third shot. Dunno if he's killed or not, but he fell and didn't light up the window with his body heat anymore.

Moving to the other side... empty. There's nobody. Well, not anymore, they're gone. And it's clear where they went…

Well... let's wait! In the meantime, I'll recharge the magazine. I'm afraid if there's a fight, I might not have time to do that.

I didn't wait for long, something went bang in the next stairwell! Fifth floor... I hid a grenade in the door before. That means they checked up to the fourth floor, didn't find anything, and moved up.

And there's a locked door! There's not much garbage around.

Does that look like someone's nest?

Given that the apartment windows have glass, it does look like a nest! You can see that well from the street, by the way.

I've built up six different distraction locations around the trader's spot, in different streets. Of course, they were different from each other, but some nasty shit was present in almost each one. Obviously a basement is set up differently than an apartment, so the traps are set up differently too... No pattern, I've been taught to avoid that many times...

Now all I have to do is wait for the villains to take action. I have no doubt that they searched the apartment very carefully and found a lot of interesting things. A sleeping bag, for example... some food and ammunition, which makes sense for a temporary shelter. And if they look even more thoroughly...

Bang!

Wow…

That shook the whole wall!

Those are (or rather, were,) some attentive guys…. I find the breach into the next stairwell behind the closet, an emergency exit of sorts. (I've been sweating so hard, making it quietly...) It's covered on both sides by closets. Open the door, push the rags hanging from the hanger to the side and you see the hole! At the apartment door, whoever is looking is free to wait for the inhabitant of the apartment until they turn blue!

There is, however, a nuance there…

A four-hundred-gram charge of some imported explosives behind the

wall, as well as two two-hundred-gram TNT charges in the fake hideout. One in each room. The detonating cord connects all this stuff into a single network that explodes at the same time (otherwise why did I do the meticulous removing and reinstalling of the baseboards). The closet door on the «exit» has a simple and ingenious Soviet-era fuse. It's basically ancient technology, and the ex-cops have plenty of them. So they're willing to share it with a good man! And I'm not the worst... although, again, it depends who you ask. The cops, judging by the amount of things they've shared with me, consider me pretty good!

I think it's uncomfortable in both apartments now, to put it mildly... And if there are any breathing people left, they'll probably curtail their search.

That's how it turned out, soon after, fewer than ten people in varying stages of fucked up left the building onto the street. They were met by five people who, I assume, were watching the house from the outside.

And, by the way, I didn't see any of them before, damn! I still have a lot to learn... smart people have said that! And it's no time to get cocky!

Soon, after bandaging the wounded, some of those who were on the street returned into the building, and that's when I got a little scared! But, as it turned out, I had no reason to be worried. Soon they showed up outside again, carrying weapons and bags. Yeah, they were picking up the possessions of the dead, which is sensible! Why leave behind valuable goods?

Looking at this bunch, I'm once again convinced that the cultists are really not my biggest fans! And after today's «greeting,» they'll hate me even more!

After placing the remaining weapons into bags, the whole crowd

packed up and, helping the wounded and shellshocked, disappeared around the corner.

***

“He’s gone, Mentor…”

“How did this happen?”

“We followed Boar. He let it slip that the Predator’s man lives somewhere near the merchant’s shop. And if the leader of the gangsters goes there…”

“I remember…” The priest tilted his head.

“We knew Gavrish’s bandits already, the same people go there regularly. It was easy to identify other customers, they all behave about the same. But when Boar comes, no ordinary people are allowed to enter the trading post, they wait in the street until he leaves.”

“While this man was allowed in…”

“Yes. And he stayed there for a while, even after the bandit and his security left. So we managed to get all our brothers there.”

“What happened after that?”

“We traced him to one of the houses where he had a shelter. Food supplies, bullets, things... Even the glass in the windows was intact!”

“You mean he really lived there?”

“Yes, Mentor. It was his hiding place.”

“Did you find anything useful there?”

“Before we could, there was a sudden explosion. And everything that was there turned into…”

“I see. How did he get away?”

“There was an emergency exit, a breach into the next stairwell. Apparently, he spotted one of the brothers. He left, it’s still unclear how, went into another building, went upstairs and shot the brother on lookout duty. Most likely he heard something and hurried to meet him, we found him on the stairs. Two bullets... he didn’t stand a chance. After that, another one of ours was killed, we found him in the bushes. And that’s it — no more clues.”

“How many times did he shoot?”

“Twice at the overlook and once on the street.”

“And you didn’t hear the shots?” The priest was surprised.

“In the building they could have been hard to hear. And in the street... maybe he was shooting at the time of the explosion?”

“Or he used a silencer... The bullets were blue?”

“Yes, they were.”

“The Predator’s handwriting... it all fits! We’re on the right track!”

Chapter 5

Oleg looks at the monitor screen and squints.

“Hmm... I wasn’t expecting that…”

“What is it?”

The technician explains.

As it turns out, the extensive Terra Group territories, built out over several years, were built on a foundation. Long before the Group started operating here, someone was already conducting various... let’s call them constructions. In any case, Oleg’s team had to connect quite modern equipment to some literally archaic infrastructure.

“You see, when you connect an old, basic ventilation system to a modern electronic analysis and control module, even simple issues are often very difficult to solve.”

Seems the unknown predecessors of Terra Group didn’t bother with saving power, the fans were always on.

“And here we have automated accounting! Every kilowatt is counted, and you have to pay for everything!”

Meaning, before the engineers of the group invaded the building’s infrastructure, it had already existed on its own. Pumps were pumping, fans were whirring, and nobody cared. Nobody even noticed the electricity being consumed.

“Issues arose when we began reconnecting the equipment to our power lines.”

Well, you can understand the Group in this case. No one can ever guarantee that somebody's invisible hand would not turn the switch off, immediately stopping the flow of electricity to all these objects. And the question of who's the boss will be decided in an instant…

"Naturally, we installed a modern control system as well."

That's when it became clear that this problem was labor-intensive and costly. They had to find additional hands.

"So that's how we got into these tunnels. They're old... very old…"

Where they led and how far they stretched was unknown to any of the engineers. And they didn't really try to find out... Why would they? For that, there were special teams, whom Oleg had met only a couple of times. They went deep into the dark passages.

"Strange guys, I'm telling you…" The technician shakes his head. "How were we trained? If you're a cable guy, you have certain clothes and tools. Tunneling service also had their own gear. No, I don't mean they had radically different uniforms, those were fairly similar…"

But these groups... they looked more like security than technical staff.

"All of them had guns! Who needs guns underground? There wasn't a war, thank God…"

When they finished setting up ventilation devices and other equipment, the brigades left these strange tunnels. That's when Oleg first saw the observation station in all its glory…

"I don't know what it's actually called. I'm sure there must be some kind of special name in the files. But believe me, it's spectacular!"

It was a completely self-contained system. After proper adjustment the equipment could work for long periods of time without requiring any human involvement. It could be controlled from outside, receiving all observation results remotely.

“Drainage, ventilation, communication: all this can and does work completely independently.”

“And where does the electricity come from?” I wondered.

“I don’t know... another team handled it.”

And now, on the screen Oleg saw a familiar location!

“Our racks!” He’s pointing his finger at the screen. “This one, right here, I mounted personally!”

“Is there anything interesting in there? I mean, in the whole structure?”

The engineer’s thinking.

“Well... There’s CCTV cameras on this rack, they’re watching part of the coast. The sanatorium, the lighthouse... The power plant and the communication towers, something else... I wasn’t ever really too curious.”

“But there are five more racks, what are they responsible for?”

“I don’t know what they control. But let’s look at the colors!”

He explains.

Everything that’s marked white is power supply. Black is tunnel service, meaning the dungeons and everything connected to them. Blue is water. Red is fire control. Yellow is communications.

“Green?”

“Security, I guess... They wouldn’t let us near them.”

We haven’t found anything else interesting on the drives yet. Mostly endless screenshots from security cameras. As Oleg explained, the camera only takes a picture if it captures some activity in its field of view. A primitive motion sensor, I guess...

And that’s all fine and dandy... but in some of the pictures you could see some rather unpleasant sights. And thanks to the fact that the text information was encoded into the image, you could easily understand what was happening.

...11.28 - D-2 sensor triggered.
...11.31 - Group D and B sensor triggered. A request has been made.
...11.34 - Request has not been answered. Mode 2 is enabled.
...11.39 - Request has not been answered. Mode 1 is enabled.
...11.41 - Request has not been answered. Mode 0 is activated.
...11.45 - Sensors of all groups cease operation. The system is in standby mode.

Yeah... what answer were they expecting... The picture clearly shows bodies scattered in the sand in different positions. One, two, three... six people. Judging by the clothes, common tramps. Looks like they never even realized what was happening. What killed them? Some kind of device like our machine gun turret? Just keep bringing ammo, and the machine doesn’t care any more than a shoe would. It doesn’t give a flying fuck who it fires at…

Four minutes and six people gone. Mm-hm-hm…

And someone had actually installed this! In peaceful fucking times!

They installed it, set it up, maintained it… didn't the motherfuckers know what the fuck they were setting up and what it could do?!

There's no war, nobody coming onto these shores with grenades!

Well... now someone probably is…

What conclusion can be drawn from all this? There's not much to be gained by searching the files. In any case the result won't be quick.

That's one.

Second, there is a higher than zero probability of success in getting into this control room and, at least partially, taking over control of this complex system, or at least part of it. Maybe we'll get remote access to it.

I can find out the location of the entrance from Oleg, he remembers. It doesn't give me an obvious advantage yet... but I can't ignore this opportunity either! The local bandit ataman is ready to help, at his own expense, even! That shouldn't be discounted either.

Number three…

How do you even get in there?

That's where I have a trump card!

In the pile of computer drives I received from Gavrish was a familiar flash drive on a chain! I'm willing to bet that's the key! It's too unlikely that the one who had this key was not connected to this operation. No, most likely, he was the man in charge.

Another question I don't have an answer to yet.

Do you literally have to walk in there? Is remotely downloading an

archive such an insane idea? Why did they even have to do all this breaking through?

Or am I wrong, and is there something else on the disks that we haven't found yet?

We have to dig...

***

The door knocked and Captain Veremeyev raised his head. Lieutenant Dobrin, the head of the reconnaissance team that had just returned from the raid to the trader, had come in.

"How did it go?"

"Fine…" The less than talkative SWAT officer pulled up a chair and sat down. "As agreed, he traded some ammo for the imported guns. As well a hundred grenades for the underbarrel launcher…"

"Impressive!" The base commander nodded. "Anything interesting?"

"We had a little clash with the Scavs, killed three of them. Fucking insane, these guys… what were they hoping for?"

"How'd that go with us?"

"Mikhejic's arm got hit. Nothing too bad, he'll lay in bed for a week and be okay. Work as number two for a month…"

Well, that's all right. Routine mission, no special consequences expected. The route's been tested a hundred times, all the nooks and crannies are well studied…

"Saw some USECs."

“Where?!” The captain was wary.

“At Khokhl’s. He was sitting there alone…”

“Alone?” Veremeyev was surprised. “Wounded, or what?”

“No. His guards were in the next house, we were warned about it by the merchant’s guys as we came in. They say they’ll sit quietly, won’t shoot. And they didn’t…”

“Then what was this guy doing sitting there?”

“He was waiting for us. He had a message.”

“What do you mean? A letter or something? Why didn’t they bring it? There’s an agreement, we don’t shoot the messengers.”

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders. He wasn’t interested in such intricacies. He was there, must have had a reason.

“Okay…” The captain pursed his lips. “What did he want?”

“He talked. He said the cultists were looking for your guest. The one named Denis. USECs have a side in this, they won’t help them. But Denis is neither a brother nor a friend, they won’t stop anyone from coming at him.”

“Well... their bad... What’s it to us?”

“Their boss asked me to tell you that the Predator is no friend. Is it worth risking your head for someone in a battle between two sides that aren’t yours?”

“Hmm. He actually saved our guy from the cultists!”

“USEC said he helped them in his time, too. But they’re even,

nobody owes anyone. He’s been paid in full.”

“It’s not just about money.”

The lieutenant took a breath.

“What’s the use explaining it to them... I said I’d pass it on.”

“Good! I got it. I’ll take this into consideration…”

***

This time the radio message was a little more informative. In addition to specifying the place of the next stash, there was also a specific task.

«Occupy the corner house at 8 Dormidontov street... Do not bully passers-by, do not engage in battle if possible. Upon receiving the signal — three short bursts of fire into the air — support those who give this signal with fire. After that you can leave.”

Short... and unclear.

Who’s going to give the signal? How long do they have to wait for that?

It’s not clear…

The group that went to look for the stashed goods brought back an unexpectedly generous catch!

Four shotguns, three AK-74s, three imported rifles and five pistols. Three boxes of ammo for rifles and machine guns, that’s quite a haul!

And three boxes of standard army rationing... that puzzled many

people. Are we working with USEC?

Upon thinking about it, Murky came up with a satisfying response, saying that the Predator is in business with everyone, so he's getting stuff from everyone. Most members of the group were satisfied with this answer, but the ringleader himself felt uneasy…

Such a haul of goods from this sinister character could mean several things.

First of all, it could mean, "I have so much stuff that this is nothing to me…"

Second, it's food plus guns. "You are being fed to follow my orders."

The orders, it must be said, aren't that complicated. Scavs were willing to put a bullet in anyone for much less.

But the reason... He'd like to know!

Deep down, Dimon perfectly understood the «value» of his army and was not fooled by grander ideas — they're expendables, nothing more. Yes, they're still being fed and armed. Exactly enough that you fulfill a single task. You do that... well, then we'll see what's gonna happen next.

But there was no other option!

There was no doubt of the Predator's influence level, the trader that had just recently told the tramps to go fuck themselves after the moonshine incident took another shipment of water without any issues. Yes, he forced them to prove its quality (in accordance with the previously tested method), reminded them about responsibility, but that's it.

Yes... with such a man one should tread carefully!

***

“I talked to my boss. It’s fine if we work together. So far, just reconnaissance. Security and the road there is your responsibility. Working at the location is mine…’ I place a half empty glass of cognac on the table.

Gavrish rubbed his hands excitedly. The idea worked!

“Done! When do we leave?”

“We can go now... I have a whole week.”

Chapter 6

Of course, “now” wasn’t feasible. The gangsters had to get ready, get their shit together... In any case, we only managed to leave the next morning.

Even though they look chaotic from outside, the ataman’s army wasn’t just a dumb crowd of urchins. They had a head guard and even a rear guard. Nobody shouted for no reason, trying to draw attention to themselves, they didn’t wave their weapons around, and in general they behaved quite competently. Compared to what it used to look like, it was like the difference between heaven and earth!

That’s to say that the dumbest ones didn’t make it this far...

“Well…” A dirty bandit looked around and scratched the back of his head. “They came from somewhere over there…”

It would be strange to expect something else, there was only one road and it would be difficult to skip it. I mean military jeeps could... But no matter what, the only way to get into the tunnel was on the highway. So there wasn’t any point in going off the path.

“But there was no way they could get past the gas station! There was an army checkpoint there at one time, the road was blocked, no way to get past. There’s been plenty of smart fuckers that tried it. There’s always someone sitting and waiting in ambush.”

“Who?”

“Fuck knows! Scavs, gangsters… sometimes even BEARs! Each of them with their own goals. There’s also a turn towards the lighthouse, boats used to arrive there back in the day. And now... something’s sketchy. It’s better not to get involved.”

“You mean the cars couldn’t have come from there?”

“I don’t think so. They came out from somewhere to the side, for sure!”

That means they came from the hills, nowhere else. Couldn’t come from the water, could they?

And that means…

We get off the road! We go through the hills, into the forest! Everybody, keep your eyes open!

Well, that didn’t even need to be said…

The cars that were shot up on the highway served as an eloquent reminder of those who put speed and comfort above safety. Let them rest in pieces!

“We walk quietly!”

I must say that the bandits have shown their best side. All giggling stopped immediately, the people gathered themselves, pulled up and carefully scanned around with their eyes and barrels.

What are we looking for?

It’s simple…

I took the screenshots from the security cameras as a foundation. Or actually, the accompanying information. As it turned out, among the many programs in the central computer of my bunker there was a program capable of searching through this data.

And I was looking for a very specific record…

As it turned out, each line of the text had its own code-identifier. Well, makes sense... it’s not just a random set of text characters!

So, for example, the triggering of sensors in zone D, the sensors farthest from a particular camera, is denoted by code 1DF228D3. The last digit denotes the serial number of the triggered sensor.

That means we can assume that all zones are divided into five categories, where zone A is the most important. In our case, these are most likely the same control rooms. But we have to get there somehow! The program clearly showed that people were actually there, that’s clear from the motion sensor readings. But they didn’t get there by air, did they? That’s why we’re looking for records from zone B, which, if you follow the logic, means the doors and whatever else is in that zone.

We’ve got three such records. Hence, those who came in somehow bypassed the previous three guard lines. And no turret had fired on them. Conclusion — there’s a shutdown terminal. I’m sure the system must have recorded the moment the code was entered.

Where does the autonomous turret switch on?

Zone B — none of the guests made it beyond there.

I very much doubt that the controllers approached the target in a roundabout way, so most of the records can be discarded. Focus on the remaining images... and voila!

Here it is, the terminal...

Even the face of the person who put the flash drive into the reader can be seen in the picture.

We’ll go back to the program…

Here’s the number of the key used.

After a short search it’s clear — our flash drive was used in two of the three cases. The third object was clearly entered by another person. Or this flash drive was simply not found.

So I have pictures of the right place in my hands. Although, you have to consider that they were taken from the opposite side! And the view in the background will be different! It’s okay... we’ll look around.

We move extremely slowly and carefully, and there are reasons for that! Somewhere far away a burst of gunfire roars. Sounds like a heavy machine gun has been fired. Single shots sound off too, seems that somebody couldn’t come to an agreement. We don’t need their problems, and there’s no use in getting into other people’s fights. So we hide and look around carefully.

And not for nothing — half a thousand meters from the place where we set up, there is a group of armed men.

“Who the hell are they?” Mitya Husky asks me. Experienced and careful, he’s the one who commands the group now. The attitude to me is very attentive and he’s not afraid to ask twice.

“Just a moment…”

My binoculars are great!

They have electronic image stabilization, anti-reflective lens coating and other tricks. The rubberized surface allows you to hold it securely in your hands, even in the rain.

So... they’ve got weapons…

And good ones, by the way!

AKs of various modifications with a lot of tech, foreign assault rifles, even a one long-range sniper rifle. Vests, flak jackets…

“Well, they’re armed and dressed really well. They’re walking carefully, no one’s making any unnecessary noise. Some serious guys…”

“BEARs?”

“Fuck knows... They don’t look much like them. Let them walk by, I guess…”

“Where the hell are they coming from?”

“According to the map they’re coming from the direction of the cottages. But I can’t see what they’re carrying. For some reason I don’t think they’re planning on carrying out linen closets.”

“Would you advise we to let them go?” The gangster’s frowning.

“We can’t cover them with one blow, they’re stretched out along the road. And they’re not sticking out in plain sight... We can’t get them right away, and getting into a long fight... do you need this kind of trouble?”

Husky looks over our army. Ten men... The chance is decent, but there are obvious risks.

“Okay, let’s let them go by quietly.”

Twenty minutes, and the group of fighters are near our ambush. Well, perhaps not actually an ambush... we’re not going to attack anyone. It’s more of a hole.

And now I can get a closer look at them.

They’re all in uniform, and the uniform is all the same. Some kind of imported camouflage. I’m wearing something similar, by the way.

Equipment standardized, almost everyone has armor. They are divided into groups of three, and each group carefully covers their own area.

Walk two hundred meters and stop.

Sit down, take a look around.

Forward again, another couple hundred meters.

They obviously went for this walk for a reason! They don’t have any cargo on them, but they have enough weapons and ammunition. This group doesn’t look much like porters or scouts, they don’t have any cargo and they’re not looking for anyone. They don’t go very far from the road, they don’t check the surroundings. It’s more like…

Patrol!

They’re patrolling some territory!

That sucks!

So there’s some place where they come from and where they return. Even their backpacks are small, can’t fit much food in there. What would they need that for? A light snack on the road fits well enough. Some biscuits, a can of meat and a bottle of water don’t take much space. And they eat properly when they come back from patrol.

On the one hand it’s good they won’t hang out on the route for long.

And on the other, a base of operations that needs this big of a patrol is unlikely to contain just two or three dozen thugs. It also needs to

be guarded, and supplies need to be taken from somewhere... I've been through this before, I have a good idea of this situation.

So there are more of them. And that's no fun at all.

But…

They patrol the road…

Does that mean they just don't want to let anyone in?

It's possible.

And if so, there's a reason for that, and it must be a good one.

Okay...

But somehow all kinds of gangs and even lone people get through here? They even make it back out, and with goods! So, it's not such a strict patrol here! The main thing is not to make any noise…

"Mitya... Tell your men to go quietly! These thugs are patrolling the road, the main thing is not to make noise and leave any trace. Otherwise, some bitch will come at us for sure!"

"All right... I'll tell the boys."

It doesn't make any sense to go any further all together. We don't know where we're actually going, do we?

That's why the whole group hides in a ravine, and only two people come with me. And while I scurry around, looking for a location match to the screenshots, they're making sure that no one hunts me.

Terra Group is a serious operation.

Very “proper” (in Western terms, of course) and advanced. No joke, they use the latest technology and the best equipment. And obviously there’s strict accounting and control over this vast and complex system! Including a unified object database, it wouldn’t work without it, Everything that is connected to the activity of the group is registered and that’s reflected in the numbers.

If anyone’s still not following my thought, I’ll explain.

If a dining room has accounting number 5D21A/2, it means the following.

5D — the square on a map where the object is located.

21A — the building itself, or a group of buildings which this dining room serves.

/2 is dining room number 2. So, there’s a number one nearby...

There’s a map (unfortunately, far from complete...) that’s available in our computers.

And the account number of the building where I used to hang out in the sanatorium I know. As well as the number for one of the warehouses in the lighthouse.

The control post located near the tunnel has a number on the map.

And the objects we’re looking for also have numbers that are organized according to this principle. Yes, there are no exact coordinates. But it is at least possible to determine the square where they are located!

But these squares... they’re not small... But there are no other references.

The day passed in fruitless searching, all the landscapes look the same.

Everyone fell asleep in one of the ravines we scouted, obviously without fire or other joys of a peaceful life. It's a good thing I had some fuel tablets in my backpack. At least we managed to warm some water up, which is great! It's still a somewhat decent life...

Again the morning comes, and again we search.

Nothing.

When I look into another ravine, I find nothing there, like all other times. Shit, it's a miss again!

And when I turn around to leave, I suddenly stop.

The smell.

It's unpleasant…

But very familiar.

There's a dead body lying around somewhere.

It's not guaranteed that it's human body. And even if it is, it's not guaranteed that it'll help me in any way.

But...

We look!

Finding the body wasn't so hard, the smell really helped.

Mm-hm-hm…

He’s an older man. He looks like he was a Scav. Stuffed clothes, regular shoes. All he had in terms of weapons was a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun. That’s a powerful thing, but only in close combat. Five rounds, a pack of biscuits, bandages... nothing else.

Okay, no one’s been through the body, so no one’s found it.

What’s that supposed to mean?

If he’d been killed in a shootout, he’d probably have been looted... but that didn’t happen.

Conclusion?

He wasn’t killed here, and the blood trail on the grass proves it. Broken branches, knocked down from the top of the ravine — he crawled from somewhere. Where did he come from?

Some people might say it’s a waste of time, determining the circumstances of the death of some vagabond! And they may be right... but not in this case!

The deceased’s chest had two bullet holes, as well as one in his arm…

Whoa!

Not only in the hand, but also in the side, and it went clean through!

The right side.

And in the side pocket was a twisted tin can, where the bullet ended up. Having gone through the arm, the bullet lost its power and entered the can a little sideways, which is probably why it did not go all the way through.

I didn’t think opening a can of meat would be so exciting!

A standard 5.56mm bullet from a USEC weapon.

Although why do I think it’s only USECs who use these? What, other people don’t use that caliber? Exactly... take your time, honey!

Hits are in the deceased’s chest and side, which means he probably tried to run away from the shooter. He took two bullets, turned around to run away (which makes sense, most people’s right leg is the main one, so he turned to the enemy with his right side…) and I got another one…

There’s unfired bullets in the barrel, so the man didn’t return fire. Why not?

Too far?

He didn’t see the shooter?

I follow the trail as far as I can see it, then I move along using pure intuition.

Whoa!

My gut was right...

One, two, three... how many are there?

Two dozen meters in front of me are several bodies.

The same tramps... Scavs?

Yes, it seems so.

But, if they were killed here, does that mean I’m in the kill zone?

Well, that’s not guaranteed! I’m just a little over the small hill, and the shooter might not have seen me yet. Shooter?

What, is he still sitting there? Didn’t get enough of the smell? Which is... peculiar! And the weapons are lying around the bodies, what, was he too squeamish to pick them up? And there’s even a machine gun! That’s quite rare, by the way, and it’s worth a lot!

Sitting down on the grass, I look back.

Three pine trees in a row, about the same height, and a birch three fingers to the right — here they are!

I’ve got a match for the screenshot!

Now I count...

Once I’m over the hill, I’m in the fire detection zone. I’m sure the previous alarm line has already been triggered and the system is on alert.

Twenty meters, we can’t go any further.

From my previous experience I can conclude that after entering the killzone I will not have much time to turn off the weapons system.

The whole system, as I understand it, is programmed so that a person can come up, enter the code and…

And what?

What if he makes a mistake?

Not maliciously, just messes up. What, they’re gonna kill him right there?

No. There's always some kind of time limit on these things. So that person can get back to a safe zone and do something else. Get in touch, for example…

How long does it take for twenty steps?

Half a minute, no more.

Is it possible to enter the code during this time?

Easy!

And if so, the terminal is somewhere nearby!

I lie on my back so I'm guaranteed not to get killed if the installation suddenly decides to open fire. Fuck knows what they have set up in there in case someone crawls into the protected zone?

And we're watching.

Trees are not an option. They grow, and any damage to the bark will be visible. A tree heals such wounds…

Under the roots?

It's unlikely for the same reason — it's a living tree! Could damage the tech as it grows.

A stump?

There are no stumps around here.

What's left?

You can't just dig a hole in the ground every time, can you? There'll

be traces!

Turns out I should have pushed the top of a stone, it turned on its axis, opening the terminal window. The top of it was covered with a transparent plastic cap.

Exactly the same as in the warehouse. And a similar groove for the key.

And I have the flash drive…

The display blinked and the long-awaited text appears on the screen. We're good to go!

It's a good thing a light bulb winked by the door, or I'd be looking for it for a long time…

Interesting, the passage is clearly very old, the concrete on the walls is darkened and in some places it's even cracked. But the whole door unit is very modern, with a servo drive and backup mechanism. In case of trouble, the door can be easily closed without electricity. I assume that opening it is also possible.

Okay, we can do that later on...

I press the button to start the locking mechanism. Electric motors whirr, shafts turn, driving massive bolts into sockets.

And that's it.

A couple more seconds, and the wall display shows the following text: «Security system activates in 2 minutes. To cancel activation, apply the key."

Fuck knows what happens when you activate it... I pull out my flash key and put it in the exact same groove as on the outside.

«Press button to open the doors.”

Well, I’m not going to open the door again just yet. I’m gonna have to take a look around here first... The tunnel wasn’t flooded with bright light, but some LEDs lit up directly above the floor, illuminating my path. Well, I actually have a flashlight, too…

After walking about thirty meters and passing the embrasure, I turn right and after another twenty meters I stop in front of a steel door. There’s an embrasure in it, too, which is currently closed. That’s nice... the last thing I need here is a barrel of a gun sticking out from it!

The same terminal, the usual operation... and panels squeak a little. Looking down, I can see shoe marks on the floor. It’s dry and dusty, which is why these footprints are visible. And you can tell that they’re going both directions.

Conclusion?

There’s no one here... the last visitors, I assume, were left by the burned out cars back in town.

I see something that looks like a control panel to the side, which is where I’ll go.

Passing some obviously domestically produced wooden crates, I come closer. By the way, the boxes are relatively dust-free, while on the floor there’s a pretty serious layer of the stuff! Have they been brought here recently?

Lighting my flashlight (what would I do without it?), I find a corresponding hole on the remote control. It is already clear that nothing is done here without the ever-useful key…

To do this, I lift the plastic cover over this control panel.

My magic wand (or rather magic flash drive) worked properly here too, the control panel lights up.

So…

The inscriptions here are in two languages. The panel looks fairly old... You can tell that at some point it had a slightly different configuration, some of the devices have been dismantled, and new indicator panels are mounted in the plugged holes.

In the vast majority of cases, old-fashioned analogue indicators have been replaced with modern LCD screens. And there are practically no bulbs left, just LEDs inserted into the slightly too large holes.

And all this has inscriptions in English on double-side tape.

Let’s read…

«Operating Room Lighting.”

Click!

Nothing.

Either the lights don’t work... or this is the wrong room. I have no other explanation.

Let’s keep looking.

Yeah, here we go!

«The duty officer’s station» – click!

Under the ceiling LED lights ignite, getting brighter every second.

Okay, so there’s an operating room somewhere else... interesting!

Okay, we can check that out afterwards.

In the meantime, there’s a much more pressing issue! Where’s the control terminal for this whole thing?

Chapter 7

Approaching the gangsters' hideout, I give the signal — drum with my fingers on my magazine.

Return drumming.

More... and more! Pause, then three knocks. This time, on the lid of barrel, the timbre is a little different.

"We hear you, move carefully."

How much I had to sweat, forcing some not so clever men to learn some apparently obvious things! Yeah... obviousness is relative…

"Who are we hiding from?" I ask Husky quietly.

"Yeah... fuck knows... someone is lurking around…"

About an hour ago a bunch of thugs like we saw yesterday walked past the camp. They were walking fast, they weren't staring around too much. Everybody had their guns ready, nobody placed them behind their backs. Their target must have been somewhere nearby.

Half an hour later from the direction the squad was heading, we heard dry sounds of shots being fired... and the fight got further away…

Who got whom is still a mystery.

"Fuck them, I'm not getting into someone else's fight!"

"That's right,» I nod. "We need to make it out with the stuff we'll carry."

“Do you have anything to carry?” Mitay’s voice changes immediately.

“Well... some stuff, sure…”

He walks around the crates, kicks them.

“What’s that?”

“Open it…” I’m lying on my side in the ravine, looking around. And not just me, another five people are scanning the surrounding area with their guns cautiously. The bandits were reasonably afraid of an attack, if anything happens it would be very difficult to escape from this hole!

The lock kicks, the lid squeaks…

“Fucking hell…”

That’s about right!

There are two PTRS anti-tank rifles in the box. With backup clips and everything else someone might need.

“Is there any ammo for them?”

“Look in the smaller crate.”

“What else is in there?”

“Three crates of SKS carbines. Ten cases of ammo…”

Dragging all this good stuff outside was quite a challenge!

Especially the heavy anti-tank motherfuckers. First an empty crate, and then each gun individually…

It took me two hours to do that!

“Where did this come from?”

“Do you give a fuck? It’s here... just take it and carry it!”

“That’s easy for you to say! How do we do that?”

I don’t argue, it’s a good question. Even if we all work together, we won’t be able to carry everything, we just don’t have enough hands. And somebody has to be on lookout, too, right?

“Look, I don’t have any good advice... Also, come here…”

The bandit is silently looking at the dead bodies.

“Who did this to them?”

“Fuck knows... Cultists, one assumes. The passage leads somewhere else... and I have no wish to go back and forth. Fuck knows those guys... there’s a hole they could have dug, right? They’re not climbing out of there, and we have to be thankful for that!” I say as I lay down on my back and scoot down a little bit.

I summarize: “In the grass, on the exit, I’ve set a mine. If anyone goes there... they’ll be sorry!”

***

“How’d you get all this stuff here?” Gavrish scratched the back of his head, squatting and looking at the mountain of weapons.

“Brute fucking force!” spits out the head of the expeditionary team. “Wasn’t easy... but we made it…”

The boss nodded. He had already heard the details of this adventure

from other members of the team. At Denis's insistence the group turned off the path they took for some reason. Well, there was actually a good reason, a small crowd of these strange thugs were on their tail. And if they went straight ahead, there was a good chance that not everyone would make it back. Sure, it's shorter and faster. But the villains following them would also move faster! By the way, they even sent out flank groups to the right and left to surround the retreating guys and press them down to the ground with fire from the flanks. Yeah, they could have dropped their cargo and made it out. But... greed is a hell of a thing!

And then the Predator's representative surprised everyone!

"Over there!" he gestured at the alley going to the left.

Husky was about to object, but then shots went off behind him. Because of the relatively big distance nobody got hit, but everyone understood that as soon as they were beyond the safety of the building and fences, they were toast…

Besides, in this case it was possible to avoid one of the groups that tried to flank the retreating bandits. Yeah, that also means getting closer to the other one... but it's worth a shot!

Already in the mood for a serious fight, the bandits went ahead. But after walking about a kilometer, the Predator's messenger suddenly ordered everyone to lie down. Why?

He didn't say, looking ahead.

"Show yourself...» he said to Husky.

One of the bandits got up and waved his hands in the air several times.

"That's enough! Get down!"

And again, the minutes passed by painfully slowly.

But... there was some movement up ahead. About a dozen thugs were walking down the street with their guns at the ready. They made it ahead!

“Don’t shoot…» Denis rose a little above the ground, looking somewhere far away.

One second... another second…

“Three short bursts into the air! Quick!”

The machine gun rattled.

That’s strange, it was probably a better idea to shoot at those guys…

But then suddenly the windows of the houses on both sides of the street were full of smoke, the thugs were hit by a volley of bullets!

“And now we join!”

The assault rifles of the bandits were crackling while the anti-tank rifle boomed louder than everything else. Successfully, too, one of the thugs was almost split in half! They fired from less than a hundred meters... hard to miss from there!

In a few moments, it was over. The bodies of the pursuers were still twitching on the ground, and the bandits, cheered up by the unexpected help, were already on their way.

“Let’s go! Quick! Pick up the guns, whatever you can carry!”

They picked up more than just guns, the guys even ripped off several bulletproof vests from the warm bodies. It’s okay, we’ll clean

‘em up, fix ‘em…

And Denis himself stayed on the spot, doing something near the dead bodies.

What exactly he was doing there became clear a little later, when behind the backs of the running bandits two explosions boomed.

“I think he mined the dead bodies…»

In any case, the squad got away from the chase. They sat in some ruins for a little bit, guns pointing in all directions, cleaning up the looted equipment. Damaged or not, the bandits put on the vests they took off the dead. Still safer than no bulletproof vest! As it got dark, they sent a messenger for assistance. He successfully got to the nearest gangster post and about fifty people came to the rescue immediately! The thugs, no matter how tough they are, had no chance at this point!

In the mess no one even noticed where the Predator’s messenger disappeared to... He was just here! And now he’s not!

“Where did he go?”

“Fuck knows... it’s like he fell through the earth! He can do shit like that…”

But anyway, it was worth the trip! Almost five dozen guns, as well as an anti-tank rifle! Where they’d actually need such a formidable weapon is not quite clear ... but the very fact they had such guns meant a lot! A sniper from the gang started begging the boss for one of these ATRs. Said he’d attach a scope and it’s be fucking epic! The boss nodded favorably, indicating, ‘let’s think about it!’

Ammo, five trophy vests, a few assault rifles…

A big catch like that would cost a lot of blood in any other situation!

“Well, who helped you?”

Mitay only shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know. We didn’t see them. They fired rifles, shotguns... It was nearby, close combat, so that worked. Shots were fired and it’s as if they weren’t ever there, everyone disappeared. They didn’t even take the trophies!”

“How did they shoot? Accurately?”

“There were slightly more than a dozen of these thugs. They were shot from two sides, 15 guns at the same time. Even a kid wouldn’t miss in this case! In the first round of shots alone, more than half of them were dead… and then we joined…”

“And they didn’t even come out for the trophies? Must be well-off…”

“Yeah… not some poor bastards, that’s clear!”

“All right, then! Everybody rest! I’ll get you some food and booze. Everybody deserves it!” Gavrish said as he stood up.

The head of the expeditionary group also stands.

Already at the door, he turns to the ataman.

“Here’s another thing... These boxes, with guns…”

“What’s up?”

“They were standing in the ravine. On the ground. Recently placed, there was a shallow trace from them. And they were... dusty.”

“Well, it’s probably not the first day they were there…”

“No!” The bandit shook his head. “They’re not dirty, they’re dusty! But that doesn’t happen outside, there’s always wind! On the sides, I agree, anything kind of dirt can get on it. But the breeze will blow everything away from the top! But there’s dust on them, you could draw with your finger! It’s a thick layer, it’s been piling up for a long time…”

“And what are you saying…”

“They came from somewhere. How long ago... well, just before we got here. It was raining in the evening and the crates were dry, not a drop on them!”

“You mean there’s a warehouse somewhere?” The ataman was thinking.

“Maybe there is. Only, none of us noticed anything…”

Mitay left, and the boss thought long and hard.

He didn’t understand something about Denis’s behavior... No, there was nothing unusual about his disappearance, the gangster had gotten used to this from the Predator’s messenger. He wasn’t surprised anymore.

But even by modest estimates, the loot that Husky’s group brought back was worth quite a bit! And the messenger’s share would have been serious! But... he didn’t ask for anything. He could have. He even should have had, no one respects fools who don’t. Denis had to have known that.

However, he disappeared…

So he got something very important in this raid. Something

immeasurably more valuable. So valuable that he didn't even care about his reputation! What's more, he didn't care about his boss's reputation either! And what could that be? So important that it's easy to write off all his mistakes?

There's no doubt this was connected to the recent trophies.

The ataman walked excitedly around the room.

Well, well, well... what could he have found there?

Boxes... Dusty, with old-style weapons. But in quite satisfactory condition, obviously warehoused. Gavrish knew about all sorts of warehouses and dungeons that existed in and around the city. It was not some secret, stories about mysterious tunnels were passed between people even in his youth. And no prohibitions could stop that. Moreover, in the heyday of the perestroika gangster revival, old Soviet and German weapons were extremely common. A fair number of them regularly surfaced on the black market. It is extremely unlikely that they were brought in from abroad, if that were the case they would have cost much more. He himself had a brand new TT, which was relatively inexpensive. Made in 1949, by the way! He even had the gun covered in preservative grease, no one had fired it for a long time. But the bullets were manufactured in 1953...

Yeah, and the Mosin–Nagants regularly making noise on the streets had to come from somewhere too, right? Certainly not from beyond the security perimeter, it's much more profitable to bring something more modern from over there!

So... let's think.

Boxes.

Someone brought them upstairs from some warehouse, the ataman was sure of it. Who and why?

The Predator’s men?

That’s bullshit.

No one was there, Mitay’s guys would have seen them for sure.

Those thugs?

Well... they could have, of course... but why did they allow them to be taken then? Something doesn’t fit!

The same tramps who were supposedly killed by cultists?

Then why didn’t the victors take anything? That’s also illogical…

It’s a deception!

A false flag, designed to get people distracted so they miss something much more important! Of course... such good stuff! We’ve got to get it out of here right away! Otherwise, somebody luckier will come along…

It’s a decent trick he played on Gavrish’s guys! They bought it, didn’t snoop around. Gavrish couldn’t blame them, it was too obvious.

And who could have done it? Who knew his people so well?

Yes, Denis himself. He agreed to go on the raid just so that the ataman’s boys would stand between him and the unknown opponents. Could he have done that?

Easy!

Gavrish stopped pacing around the room and sat down.

No...

He’s tricky, isn’t he?

Denis could have gone through any defensive line alone without any problem, there was no doubt about it. But... he didn’t go…

And judging by the stories of his escorts, he was searching for something there. Looking around, climbing into pits…

No, he couldn’t have known anything for sure, just had a hunch he wanted to explore. And to do that he needed backup.

There’s another inconsistency!

The people who opened fire on the guys chasing them, who were they? And why did they start shooting at them?

The fact that the Predator’s messenger had deliberately led the persecutors to a prearranged ambush was clear, he knew exactly where they were sitting and what they could see. As well as the fact that the shooters could have done the same to Husky’s group. They could have, but they didn’t. And they didn’t venture out for trophies... a bunch of rich boys, it seems!

Hmm, so it turns out he anticipated the possible pursuit, too? Seems that way... And he forced an attack on the patrol of these thugs.

Well, that makes sense.

After making a fuss on the coast and taking some nice trophies, Murky’s men might have well considered the task done and rushed back. And who the fuck would keep them there…

And here they (allegedly accidentally) found some cargo, had it carried out, and took some nice trophies. And now who will say a word against the unknown Predator?

He’s a sly one!

What, Denis couldn’t take these unknown shooters to cover him? Easily... But he took Gavrish’s men.

Why?!

The ataman did not understand...

Chapter 8

“So…” Yuri Gruzny retreated one step, admiring the work he had done.

The massive table had some clamps, and between them was the ATR. Semi-disassembled, with the bolt removed.

A polyethylene tube was inserted into the barrel of the gun, and a steel rod was pushed into the barrel, preheated. Before that, the sniper had meticulously checked the rod for curvature by rolling it on the table several times.

“Come on,» he nodded at his number two.

Toha Antic attached two bars to the ends of the rod, inserting the ends into the drilled holes. Into similar holes at the top, he inserted another rod, a bit smaller in diameter. The spacing between the holes was carefully calibrated, and both rods were now arranged strictly in parallel.

Putting a U-shaped template on the top rod, his number two moved it back a little. He tightened the screw, now the template could not move anywhere.

The sniper squatted, looking at the entire contraption.

“Fuckin’ A! Now let’s drill the holes…”

After a few minutes, two holes were ready and Antic, armed with the appropriate tools, began to carve into them.

“Bingo!”

“The next two…”

In order to install the sights on the ATR, it was necessary to prepare the rifle barrel itself, its design did not provide for such an upgrade. The sniper immediately ruled out the option of mounting the bar under the «swallow's tail." Powerful recoil could loosen the mount and knock all the settings to hell. Therefore, a more complex but reliable attachment method was chosen — a bar was to be installed on both sides of the weapon, on which the sight was to be installed.

But here it was important to observe the alignment and exclude any possible deviations.

"Man, if I had a normal workshop...» Yuri sighed. "Where can I find one now?"

It took a whole day of prep and now both snipers were trying to avoid any mistakes.

Finally, all the holes were ready, and Antic, having disassembled the structure, began to carefully remove the rod from the barrel. It's done!

A spent casing with a hole drilled in the bottom was inserted. A simple laser pointer was stuck into it, a smart move. Click, and a green spot appears on the wall of the workshop.

The sight was fixed to the bar, and the sniper, looking at it, nodded satisfactorily — the point was located directly on the vertical line of the sighting grid. After fiddling with the sight, the sniper nodded — everything is set!

"All right, check the tightness of the screws and assemble, let's try it out."

The test was extremely simple — they stepped back a hundred meters and shot into a clearly distinct brick on the wall of a building.

Obviously, the first shot didn’t hit right. That’s fine...

Half an hour later, Yura leaned against the wall, satisfied.

“Well, we’re not hitting a mosquito’s eye with this gun... but it doesn’t need it. But any car, this fucking thing’s gonna tear through, as well as almost any walls. I’m not gonna even mention the newfangled aluminum buildings. That’ll just be sad.”

“Hmm!” His number two smiled. “I think it might even slow down an APC, too.”

“Well, luckily we don’t see these kinds of gadgets too often, thank God... But to unleash it on a USEC armored car — it’d be toast! The armor doesn’t hold up too well against a machine gun, and against this thing...» said Yuri. “Okay... let’s go to the ataman, he asked me to keep him in the loop.”

***

The Scavs in the former warehouse had a lot of excitement going on!

Some people wouldn’t categorize what was happening as excitement, they’d call it something different, and they would certainly be right!

The grim mood that the squad was in when they left for the ambush was replaced by the most unrestrained celebration and bravado, and there was no reason to object! Nor was there anyone to object…

The ambush team saw well who was walking down the alley. They were way better equipped and trained than the Scavs. But... it didn’t help them much, everyone was dead.

The Scavs, emptying their magazines, quickly rushed back home, as they were told. No one had any desire to inspect the results of their

work, it’s better to make it out alive!

The leader, after listening to a brief report, spent half a day in heavy reflection — what the fuck actually happened in the end?

Only the radio, which started crackling at the agreed upon time, finally made things a little clearer.

«Mission accomplished, take the cargo from another stash tonight.”

Well... that’s something!

Cargo…

One and a half dozen automatic rifles, several shotguns, four crates of ammunition, four crates of canned food, and two dozen food rations — some really good stuff!

Yeah, the guns aren’t new, but they’re working and they’re powerful! And ammo! There are now serious arguments between the disgruntled Scavs, each trying to get their hands on something.

The authority of the ringleader has grown considerably! Even in his own eyes, if he was being honest.

For this occasion, the whole crowd, which was already beginning to acquire the features of a real gang, received a whole box of moonshine so that they know who the boss was! A box of canned food was also offered for the party. In the current situation, a can of stewed meat was valued no less than caviar. So the party turned out to be big, even the guards got fucked up. However, the lair of the Scavs wasn’t being attacked anymore, so they could relax a little…

By the way, the crates didn’t have anti-tampering bombs this time. Although they had to be personally opened by Murky himself, the message stated so explicitly.

One of them had a package for the ataman himself.

A thousand euros!

He had never held so much money, even in his past life!

Now it's clear why such precautions were taken. He did not doubt for a second that his army would have pocketed the envelope and swore convincingly that nothing was there! The ringleader had no illusions, he knew who he was dealing with… And that's why he wouldn't talk about this to anybody, they can live without this knowledge.

***

It's the second day I'm spending glued to the computer. Not just me, Oleg also hits the keys of the computer next to me, trying to establish a connection to the bunker I found. Something doesn't match, he's frowning and irritable. I think I did everything right... but something's going wrong.

"There's some tricky defense system here…" my comrade reluctantly admits.

All right, let him handle it for now. I have a more interesting task at hand.

As I suspected, these structures are very old. And they certainly weren't built by Terra Group, they were dug up at least thirty years ago!

These are not defensive structures, I found no trace of stationary weapons. Although... maybe I didn't look hard enough?

They're not warehouses, I didn't find any sign of goods being

brought in. And it's just plain hard to drag heavy crates through a narrow door, I sweated my ass off…

The weapons and ammunition that were in the operating room clearly came from somewhere else. What for? Only god knows…

Yes, there were a lot of interesting things in the computers, and I even copied some data, as much as the external drives that I had on me could fit. I had no choice but to grab what I could. It's only natural that I could have missed something.

In this case, the Terra Group's patterns were useful, because luckily, both of us knew them well.

There is secret information for official access, and then there is everything else. The first type of data is hard to find, let alone read. The second category is accessible to anyone that's supposed to have access. Usually it is not hidden, just protected by a service password or the flash key.

Everything else is just stored freely.

Hidden things might take a long time to look for. Encrypted or password protected, you can't just look through it.

And that's why I didn't spend any time on it, the result could have been very unpredictable…

I went from the other side.

What am I interested in anyway?

The opportunity to go somewhere and make it in one piece without getting two or three extra holes in my body, that's what.

You can walk down the street, of course, with an unpredictable

result. It's a little quieter underground, at least no one's hiding behind every corner. Of course, someone could get in there, I'm not the only one that's so smart. But it's highly doubtful that someone would organize an ambush on a person that goes in the tunnels. Besides, you might have to sit there for a long time…

What do you need for a safe journey underground?

Air, no water, no rubble, I'll take care of the light myself.

What's that gonna take?

That's right... we look at the ventilation and dehumidification system, that's no secret. The on-duty technicians (like Oleg and his team) had to arrive at the right place and work quickly, without getting tangled with the first department of the Group. If you wait to get the necessary approval, everything will be flooded to shit by then!

The map shows the locations of ventilation and drainage pumps. I don't care that I don't have a detailed map of the tunnels, this equipment wasn't just buried in a pit, was it? If there's something there, there's a tunnel there too. An underground passage... away from anyone else's eyes. And if there's a tunnel, there must be an exit, that's just logic. Just digging tunnels somewhere blindly... yeah... you want a mirror? That's where you'll see the fool! All this was obviously dug back in the Soviet Union, by big state organizations, and these groups didn't keep idiots on payroll for long. So it's a safe bet that there are definitely entrances and exits. Locked, that's as clear as day. I highly doubt that all this is connected to the rest of the network, with the security alarms and motion sensors. The USSR doesn't exist now, local authorities probably weren't even aware of all this. And so, Terra Group simply never had an opportunity to quickly install the necessary distribution networks and control devices in every spot in the tunnel system.

But, in any case, I gotta be careful! If anything happens, there will be

no one to get me out.

Chapter 9

Once again I’m crawling on my belly in the bushes. The path is familiar, but I look around very carefully.

And not for nothing!

I don’t think that this skirmish happened that long ago, we passed this spot and it was clean.

And now, there are some bodies…

Let’s slow down and take a look around.

Yeah, this one’s obviously a BEAR, there’s a patch on his sleeve. And the other one... yeah, who can make it out... But they’re lying next to each other, and they were probably looking in the same direction. So, they were together.

I don’t see guns, I suppose the victors took them. You can see the unbuttoned pockets of the combat vest, obviously, they were looking for ammunition. So there’s no need to go there, I don’t think I can find anything useful, but a grenade could have easily been installed under the body.

I’ll go around this spot and make a mental note that this location is not so safe. I guess that’s what the pair assumed... and they shouldn’t have!

A mound.

It’s almost bald, the grass on it is very sparse. You can’t crawl past it to the left, there’s a steep slope. On the right, at first glance, it looks like it’s okay... but something keeps me from making that maneuver... I don’t know what it is... but I don’t want to crawl in that direction! The

grass there is thick... the visibility from the side won't be good, but…

Now, if I was on that hill over there myself, what would I do?

Bypassing this area is possible, of course, but it's a hell of a walk! There are mostly open spaces, no special cover, even a crawling person will be well visible. It's about 800 meters to the forest, but crawling there... it's quite a challenge…

This is the best place!

It's only thirty or forty meters away, then a steep descent into a ravine, and there, as far as I remember, are some thick bushes. Even a sniper, even with a scope, won't see shit.

So do they lie here?

What's the point?

I mean, I've got a relatively good view here too, and bushes behind my back, so there's somewhere to go if I need to duck out of view. If I can't see the people approaching, I'll definitely hear them. And I'll have time to hide quietly.

Of course, I may be paranoid... but I just don't like this particular route anymore! And the feeling's getting stronger by the minute!

Let's say I get over this mound... then what?

Next I go down, there's a ravine, bushes…

Yeah... how does that old joke about the unlucky skydiver go? "There's a haystack there, and in it a pitchfork…"

Of course, where else would a man who just escaped a sniper bullet run? Exactly, into the bushes, there's bad fucking visibility.

Yeah, well, that’s true, visibility is terrible for everyone there.

Including the person that’s running.

And he’s not gonna notice a stretch mine…

Hear it, maybe. But it will be the last thing he’ll ever hear in his life.

I shouldn’t have gone this way!

What did my teachers say at the base? «The short road leads to the grave!”

That’s a great aphorism, I must say.

***

“Where’s that smartass?” the sniper asked, not taking his eye off the scope.

“Yeah... fuck knows…” the number two was looking at the target through his binoculars. Or rather, trying to look for it.

“He’s like a water snake in the sun! Squirming here and there. I can barely see him. And even then not all of him.”

“Who is he then? All squirmy and shit?”

“Not from the Scavs, he’s wearing proper camouflage. As far as I can see, he’s decently equipped, too…”

“USEC, you think?”

“Um... well... I can’t rule that out. It’s just that they almost never walk alone. You’re right, though, there are some characters among them

that do…”

The sniper spit and took his eye away from the rifle.

“So what do we do with him now? He’s not going to try and go through the alternative routes, is he?”

“If you’re talking about our ‘surprises,’ then probably not. He’d have done that a long time ago... we’d have heard…”

“You mean he’s not going over the top now, for sure?”

“No. If he was planning to, he wouldn’t be belly-polishing the ground. You gotta call the guys, my heart tells me there’s something up with this squirmer.”

“All right, whatever you say!” the second sniper nodded.

“Cordon! This is Zed 2! Come in!” the number two says as he bring the walkie-talkie to his mouth.

“This is Cordon! I’m listening.”

“Mark fourteen. Suspicious activity. One man. Do you read me?”

“Roger, mark fourteen. Direction of movement?”

“Crawling from the direction of the tunnel. The coastline is to his right, he’s moving exactly towards us. We can’t get a clean shot, the target shows himself only occasionally. We need a raid team to clean up.”

“Roger that, Zed 2. I’m sending out a team, ETA one hour. Don’t scare him off…”

“Cordon copies. We won’t…”

***

I have to go!

Or, rather, crawl away, getting on my feet now is a bad idea. I'm sure that move will be «appreciated." Except, I don't really give a shit about anyone else's evaluation of my action. Besides, there's an almost certain chance that evaluation will come in form of lead. Or whatever else bullets are made of? I don't really want to find out…

Let's crawl.

Quietly, carefully, choosing the places with the most cover, at least in my estimation. At least in theory... I can't be sure that the sniper (or several snipers) sits (sit) in this particular place. So, I'm hiding from everybody at once.

And that's why I'm moving extremely slowly.

But I am moving!

I've crawled a good two hundred meters from this unpleasant mound. Although an extra 200 meters is nothing for a good gun. No real difference, just aim a couple… a couple markings higher…

I continue my crawl.

Finally, a ravine!

I can crawl down here, looking around carefully, and breathe a little easier. Such a crawl is not like some warm-up in a fitness center, it takes much more effort.

I sit... the shivering in my legs gradually passes.

Maybe I’m panicking here for nothing. What if there’s no sniper here at all? That’s quite possible.

The only way to make sure is get on my feet and walk in that direction. Take your time... for there’s probably never going to be another reason to hurry anymore.

No, fuck that noise… let somebody else do it!

I’m in no hurry anywhere, thank God. I’d rather get there later, but on my own, and with the same number of holes in my body that I currently have.

I’m fucking hungry…

Yeah, right, and take a nap, too! Are you fucking insane, honey? Sleep!

I gotta go.

Down the ravine, there’s a narrow and a winding... like a ditch, something like that. Anyway, I can walk down it, even if I can’t move too fast.

But I need to move with caution!

Why?

Well, I remember some of the lessons smart people have taught me…

I’m not a super warrior or anything, obviously. But I can’t complain about my memory! My previous occupation has gifted me with the habit of using my head. I analyze what is in front of me, and I can draw certain conclusions from what I have recently learned from smart people.

What we have here is a location that is theoretically convenient for a sniper ambush. You can't go in one direction, because there's a cliff and it's not safe at all. On the other side there is a high probability for all sorts of surprises. You can only get past through a relatively open and potentially well-watched place. And on the way there, «suddenly» there are dead bodies of a couple of BEARs... Who for some reason did not follow this convenient route. I wonder why.

Did they know something or did they guess?

I mean, you can't get past this place to the right or the left, you can only walk forwards. And somebody's gonna tell me that it's good and safe?

Yeah, yeah…

So, I highly doubt that this ditch is safe, either.

Oh, what do we have here, proof that I'm right?

The bullet on the string hanging from the end of my assault rifle suddenly moved back, signaling that some obstacle prevented it from moving on.

They taught me this trick back in the warehouse, and it came in handy!

So what do we have?

A wire...

It's gray.

Unsightly.

I’ve seen these things, my teachers showed me. These strings activate all kinds of nasty stuff. Let’s not make a fuss, let this thing stay. I’m not experienced enough to dig something up and defuse it. There might be traps there, too, why the hell would I do that?

The knife goes aslant into the ground.

«Stick it in at an angle!» That’s what they used to tell me. Let’s not get cocky and just follow the advice of the right people.

A puncture, another one, another one... A little further…

No, there’s nothing buried in the ground under the wire and right behind it. I can step over it.

I take another look around. I think it’s clear…

A step!

I break into cold sweat immediately!

No, nothing’s happening yet, I can continue checking the road.

Puncture, puncture, puncture — empty!

What, they didn’t install anything?

Well... that’s quite possible. I don’t know what’s buried in the ground, but there’s no way to avoid any explosion. The ditch is no more than two or three meters wide in the widest place. It’s almost straight in this section, there’s nowhere to get away from the blast and the shrapnel. If anything goes off, everybody in the vicinity would be a goner.

It’s doubtful that people would put another mine in here.

Having meticulously probed the ground for another twenty meters, I confirm there is nothing else here. The ditch, meanwhile, is gradually getting wider, and one mine probably wouldn't cover it... Though I've heard there are different sized mines, too.

But I'm behind the ridge now, and no sniper, not even the notorious Hawkeye, could actually hit me through several meters of dirt.

Did I break through?

Almost immediately I throw myself to the ground.

Voices!

From the direction I just came from!

That's now behind me and about ten meters above. There's no wind, and I can hear the voices quite well.

"Ksssh... no, he didn't leave, we would have noticed him."

"But he didn't go down, either!" That voice can be heard much better, which means it's coming from a human, not a transmitter.

The person speaking is now standing almost at the site where I was recently crawling. And if it wasn't for the thick bushes, they might have already noticed me. So that means I walked around the nasty place where someone must have seen me, and came back almost to the same spot. Just below and to the right, about 20 meters…

I hope this dude isn't planning on walking into the bushes? A few minutes ago I didn't go, reasonably afraid (and now obviously for a good reason) of some explosive crap, I hope that he is not dumber…

"Ksssh... we'll continue observation…"

“All right, and we’ll check around. He definitely didn’t come out to meet us. The trail only leads here. And you can see where he was crawling around…”

Well, fuck me... now they’ll follow my trail and I’m done-zo!

Is there anything further down?

I don’t think so... it’s not the front line of some war, it’s just a place for a potential ambush. It’s not like there’s some regiment planning to break through, so there’s no need to plant mines everywhere. But will these smart guys go beyond their mines?

Maybe... I didn’t hide my tracks much, they’re quite visible in the wet soil.

And can the snipers shoot further down the road?

Fuck knows... but I can’t rule that out. Running under their bullets is a thankless task. And it wouldn’t last long.

Okay.

We’ve got some surprises in our repertoire, too…

There’s a small tree growing nearby. Here, in a fork in the twigs, I cut a small relatively flat area with a knife. The chips, by the way, go in my pocket, I don’t throw them on the ground!

It’s done.

A grenade from my combat vest, unscrew the fuse a little and tie it with a strong thin thread. Thread goes around twig, the grenade, trigger lever down into the fork. That’s why I made the platform… so the lever could fit there. It won’t slip or slide.

I tie the trigger lever with monofilament. In regular life, it's usually used to sew beads on clothes, so that the thread itself would not be particularly noticeable. I have nothing to sew here, but the low visibility of this thread is going to be very useful.

I throw the thread across the path.

Well, not really a path... I throw it over my trail, since I've made a mark in the grass here.

I don't make the thread tight, it hangs relatively free. It sags, even the breeze rocks it back and forth a little. That's okay…

I go back and gently pull the safety pin out of the grenade. Now, if you just pull it the monofilament, the grenade will fall off its «perch»... and hang from the other, stronger (but also more clearly visible) thread. But there are branches covering it, you can't even see it from the side. And the monofilament will fly away to the side, along with the safety lever... And the grenade will not go anywhere, it will remain on the branch.

A meter above the ground, by the way!

And then they would be fucked.

You can try to run, you can try to hide.

You can even try to fly away... the result is gonna be the same.

The explosion's gonna go off above the ground, shrapnel's gonna fly everywhere. They'll get hit even if they're lying or squatting, let alone standing or walking.

Running forward, I sit down. I cut a few branches with my knife on the way and now sharpen them quickly.

I’ve got four spikes!

I stick two of them in the ground.

Making a loop from the same monofilament, I place the lower end on the ground, and the upper over the spikes. Now anybody who walks here will inevitably get their foot stuck in that loop and drag it along.

The thread is thin, almost weightless and nearly imperceptible, they’ll definitely carry it two or three meters.

And considering that the other end of the thread is tied to a grenade... and without a pin, by the way... It’s just dug in a little, the lever kept in place with dirt. Just to make sure it doesn’t go off, I used a couple of other branches to fix it in place. I stuck them into the ground like a triangle, so the grenade can’t jump up, it’s kept in the same position.

I step back and admire my design. Well... just a pinch of grass scattered on top and I’m good!

Next... next, I do something completely illogical. In some ways even incorrect!

In my position, upon setting up such unpleasant «surprises,» any other man would run ahead as fast as he could to increase the distance between himself and the angry pursuers.

Yeah... that works if you know where to run…

I don’t know these trails very well, but the locals, one assumes, know them inside and out.

I’ll run in the wrong direction and it’s fucking curtains!

Screw running away!

So, trying not to leave any more trace, I turn off the seemingly logical route. You can still see some traces, I stepped on wet dirt a couple times on purpose, and then, just nothing! I walk about thirty meters, turn around and move back, parallel to my tracks. So... I've passed the second trap…

Twenty more meters, and I find a fallen tree in front of me. Okay, underneath it is where I'll hide…

The visibility here is frankly dismal, but the audibility... is very good!

Of course, I didn't hear the guys chasing me, they're not foolish enough to make noise and talk when in pursuit.

They passed their mine site quietly and without issue. Well, you would hope they'd manage that!

I didn't hear the clap of the grenade fuse. Well, I'm not close enough.

But the explosion itself…

Some shards even made it into my tree!

It's no wonder, they're supposed to go as far as two hundred meters! And I'm much closer!

But all kinds of swear words were heard very well in my hiding place... That indirectly confirmed the effectiveness of my trap. They wouldn't be cursing for no reason.

No shooting, one has to assume they realized it wasn't just a grenade thrown from some ambush point. Well, basically, that makes sense — there's no normal hiding places nearby, nowhere to lie down. The slopes are rocky, there's not much vegetation. So the area is not very favorable for an ambush, that's clear even to me.

After a few minutes, the cursing stops.

With the help of a slightly raised mirror above the barrel, I examine the approaches to my shelter — clear. And besides the tree lies aslant, apparently falling from somewhere high up. For an ambush it's not a great place. If it was seen from the trail, it didn't arouse much suspicion.

Okay... now let's just check to see if we're getting this right.

Ba-boom!

This is the second one!

This time it was quiet at the explosion site.

Did I get them all? Come on... there's no way... we'll wait!

A minute, another... ten…

No, it's quiet.

What do I do? Sit here?

Well, no one is forcing me to leave... I can even sleep here... But it's better to do that somewhere else!

Binoculars! Motherfucker... I'm such an idiot that I forgot about them!

But you can't see anything from this position... I have to crawl further.

How many of them could there even be?

About two or three men were swearing after the first grenade went off. That many people could have easily been killed by the shrapnel.

I doubt they were left there, I'm sure someone helped them back or dragged them. Following even a single person alone is crazy, you need to have a group of three or four people at least. Could the second grenade have put them all down?

I don't think so…

They're at least a little smart, so it's likely they didn't continue on together as a group. The battle tactic of bunching together is clearly not followed by these guys.

So the one that was hurt was the one that ended up in the noose I made…

Another ten meters, and I use my binoculars again.

For the second time, I can't see anyone or anything... and I'm pretty close to the mine site. Fuck... Are they crazy? Did the whole crowd follow my footsteps? Well, they won't get far... 40 meters... there'll be no tracks.

Voices!

There they are!

They must have crawled to the side…

Yeah, somebody's been hurt quite a bit. That's why they dragged him aside, to patch him up a little...

Well, let's not be stupid.

Carefully, trying not to make any noise, I cross my old tracks, now it's so trampled that I wouldn't miss it if I were blind.

There were a lot of them!

Five or six at least!

Well, time for a couple more gifts. They're expecting danger from the side where I retreated to. Well, that makes sense. An unknown villain leaves and mines his tracks.

So I go up to the edge of the ravine that's closer to the sniper position, and come up to them from the side where they just came from. From the back and to the left…

Here they are!

Down among the branches you can see their figures.

So…

Two of them are lying down and one of them is in some weird pose. A living person wouldn't lie like that, you have to assume he's already dead.

The second one is obviously wounded – his pant leg is torn or cut, and there is a third character sitting next to him. Medic?

In any case, he's the one who's bandaging the wound, it seems. And now he's looking at something, leaning over the wounded man.

But the other two look unharmed, I'm not seeing any wounds. One of them is looking around, holding a gun, and the other one is saying something into the radio. Calling for backup?

That's not good, dude... we don't need anyone else here!

I must say, there were some very strange things in that container in the port. Some rather strange grenades. The usual rings and safety pins aren't present at all on these, to throw them, you had to

unscrew the lid and pull on a ball that falls out. After carefully studying the instructions, I figure out that this is a fuseless grenade. Its difference from my usual choice was that there is no ignition capsule at all. When it was activated, its slight hissing sound was difficult to hear from a few meters away. The grenade looked like an oblong tin, with an outer mesh construction made from thick nails that could be attached. Or in any case something very similar. That way, the resulting additional shrapnel fragments could fly fifty meters or even more.

In terms of range and ease of throwing, this thing was noticeably worse compared to an ordinary grenade. The same F-1 could hit a target at a much longer range. But this grenade ("M-46," if you believe the markings on the crate,) had two indisputable advantages.

First, it was much quieter, no loud bangs or other sounds before the explosion.

Second, at close range it threw out a lot more shrapnel, which was also very convenient.

And in this case…

I pull, it fizzes, starts!

I get up and with a strong throw send the grenade towards the target. It's close, about 30 meters.

The second one!

Then I get on the ground! There's a bush between me and these guys. It's a flimsy defense, to be honest, but there's also a small hump…

Again, the shards MAY fly this far, that's true. But there's not enough to cover everything around here…

Boom!

Boom!

Something’s pulling at my backpack! A piece of shrapnel! Well, at least it’s not in my head, that’s good news!

Look down, there’s no movement. The one that was on the radio is lying there and doesn’t move. The second one is rolling on the grass, seems to be screaming... you can’t make it out from here. The medic…

Where’s the medic?!

Oh, there he is... stuck his face in the ground and not responding to anything either.

Okay, now I can check out who the hell they are.

***

“Cordon, this is Zed-2.”

“This is Cordon.”

“The raid team, call sign Katran, suddenly stopped radio communication. Right in the middle of a conversation. I’m trying to call them and silence. Shortly before that there were several explosions, the last two were clearly not ordinary hand grenades.”

“Can you assume control of their location?”

“The answer is no.”

“Roger that, keep watch. You are to attempt to call Katran regularly!

I’m gonna redirect two raid teams from other precincts to your area. Can you give me the exact coordinates?”

“Cordon, it’s between 14 and 16. I can’t be more precise, this area is not visible from our point.”

“Copy that, Zed-2. Keep watching. Over and out.”

“Over and out.”

***

As I approach, the wounded man appears to hear me and tries to take action. Of course he wasn’t planning on greeting me with pies and tea, so I decide not to wait and shoot him in the hand that he tried to move.

The shot is almost silent and I thank fate for the millionth time for this gorgeous submachine gun. The shot is precise, powerful and very quiet. Exactly what I need!

The man on the ground doesn’t seem to share my joy and hisses through his teeth. Well, you behave yourself... and we’ll manage to continue without shooting…

And you don’t need to pick your head up, either!

Push my foot on his shoulder (say thank you for not pushing the wounded one...), and the villain buries his nose in the grass again.

“Who are you people?”

“And you... fucking hell! What the fuck are you, you hillbilly?!”

“Funny you mention a hill, that’s where I shot at you from! So, shall we talk?”

“Give me a bandage! I’m gonna bleed out!”

“I don’t give a fuck if you piss yourself. If you talk, I’ll give it to you, if not... you’ll bleed out. Without any involvement on my part, might I add!”

The villain is swearing. With good word choice, expressively and with vigor. A talent, damn him! How do guys get talents like this?

One thing I can say right now is he’s not a foreigner. His language is Russian – and very... peculiar.

“Are you done?”

I’m looking around. Where there’s one group, there’s often another.

“What do you want?”

“Spit it out, who are you and where are you from? And, quickly! You’re running out of time!”

“What’s your hurry?”

“I’m not in a hurry... I could even have a picnic. But some other people might croak from blood loss in the meantime.”

“We’re raiders!”

“From this point on please be more specific…”

Chapter 10

“Hawk to Zed-2.”

“This is Zed-2.”

“Approaching from the direction of mark 20.”

“Roger that, Hawk. Katran never made contact, no additional shots or explosions heard.”

“You’re gonna hear some shots soon it seems…”

The group of raiders that jumped out of the bushes was extremely belligerent and ready to tear anyone to shreds. But there was nobody to tear up. Nobody shot at them or tried to throw grenades at them.

Katran, or rather, what was left of it, was found quickly. Surprisingly, there were two survivors! The group’s deputy commander and a medic. He was just finishing his friend’s bandage.

“Oh fucking hell... Who did this to you?!” The raider, callsign Hawk, was shocked.

“Predator…” the medic managed to say as he winced from the pain in his wounded leg.

“What... Predator? Some kind of beast?”

“A fucking beast, that’s for sure… evil! First he booby-trapped the route, the bastard, and then he threw something at us on top of that. Although I think he was lying, obviously he used a mortar, the explosions were powerful. No grenade does that…”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Got shot in my leg, and the explosion hit me pretty hard…» The medic winced. “I injected myself with some trimeperidine, that’s why I’m holding on. But Mitya, he fucking got killed! I just got him to stop bleeding!”

“So…» Hawk sat down on the grass. “You say it was mortar?”

“Just look at the craters the explosions left. I’m telling you, it wasn’t a grenade! There wasn’t even the usual noise.”

“I’ll take another look…”

The presence of a mortar seriously complicated the search! A weapon like that is clearly not carried by one man under his arm, there have to be calculations! And a spotter at the very least!

“So, the ambush was made according to all the rules? At first glance, yes…”

“All right. More specifics, more detail.”

“On the first mine we lost one, but two others were badly hurt. We dragged them uphill, there’s a sniper looking over them, and then we went here…”

“How’d it explode? What was it?”

“I’m not a bomb squad! One thing I can tell you is that it went off in the air, the bush was gone! I guess that it hit a branch…”

“Are you sure?”

“Katran himself took a look…” The medic was tired. “He said it was an accident, hit a piece of wood. That’s why a lot of people were

hurt, the fragments flew far. If the mine had exploded on the ground, only the ones closest would have got hurt, there are bumps of all sorts... they could have caught some of the fragments…"

"You said two, didn't you?" The group leader was surprised.

"Two are the ones who couldn't even walk on their own! Many people got grazed a little…"

The head of the team just shook his head.

"Okay. What next?"

"Right over there. Ignat got caught up in something. I don't know what it was, but everyone heard the clap. He ran... Thought he might be able to run away."

"I guess his plan didn't work…"

"Yeah. Lacis also caught a shard of shrapnel. Well, I got some too, and not just me... but not too serious. Katran was concussed, but not so badly, Valya took his radio. Everybody pulled back to lay down behind the bush… Valya called, and the boss says, 'Give me the radio.' He took it... That's when it went to shit!"

The speaker swallowed convulsively.

"I heard somebody whispering when I come to my senses. Quiet... but I shuddered!"

"Why's that? Did he promise to cut your balls off?"

"No…" The medic shook his head. "Didn't say anything of the sort. But he says to Valya, 'You try anything, you'll bleed out. And I'll sit next to you and eat.'"

“What?” The group leader got a little freaked out. “Eat? Eat what?”

“I don’t know... he wasn’t talking loudly. And my ears were ringing!”

“Okay, so what happened next?”

“I don’t know... I think I fainted. All I know is, he said ‘Don’t go after the Predator, you’ll find your death!’ Ask Valya... he talked to him…”

But the second raider couldn’t give much useful information. He had been lying down, his face in the grass. He didn’t see the notorious Predator at all.

“Yes, he spoke very quietly, almost a whisper. He said not to follow him, if that happened no one would come back.”

“And you just listened!”

“He shot me in the hand! I’d like to see what you would do in this situation!”

“You sure it was a mortar?”

“I don’t know... Not a grenade, that’s a fact. But I didn’t hear the whistling of a mortar.”

Another raider came up and presented the commander with his open palm. There were some pieces of metal... some broken metal bars.

“What the hell is that?”

“The shards, they were stuck in Micah’s armor.”

“Holy shit...» said the leader. “Yeah, it’s definitely not from a grenade... I’ve never even seen that before!”

“It wasn’t a self-made grenade,» the man confirmed. “Right there, see? Do you see the coating on them?”

“Gray... Paint or something?”

“No. It’s a special spray, not paint at all. Well, at least not exactly paint... In short, it wasn’t made in some garage. That’s factory made…”

“Could a mortar shell have such fragments?”

“Well... if you equip it with ready-made shard elements, yes, they can. Fuck knows... I wasn’t standing next to that mortar operator, was I?”

It was a complicated and confusing situation. Raiders felt that this area belong to them, or at the very least they were important figures in it. Even the former private army soldiers tried not to get into fights with them. There was no friendship or cooperation, of course, but there wasn’t an open conflict either. And the Scavs and the Bandits were even easier, they tried to stay out of the way of raiders by walking in a big arc, avoiding even the slightest possibility of meeting them.

And yet here we are...

Losing almost a whole team, that hasn’t happened in quite some time. Single person losses are common, and rather unpleasant. And here…

An organized ambush with heavy weapons? The army’s abandoned roadblocks had some large-caliber machine guns, but a mortar…

Not very big, by the way. Judging by the crater, about fifty millimeters. Western or Ukrainian, the Russian army does not use this caliber.

It’s not handheld, you don’t just run around the woods with it! You need to install it, aim it...

It appears that someone, with knowledge of the sniper ambush, deliberately appeared in their line of sight, drawing attention. Risky move by a smart guy, he could have been shot easily! At the same time, the organizers of all this were confident that the sniper would call for backup. And it was this group that got caught in a trap, even getting caught by a mortar! And the trail was booby-trapped... and as it happened, the mine previously installed by the raiders was not touched, simply bypassed. So all suspicions were put to rest…

And, by the way, at this moment the suspicions should have been the highest! It wasn’t a bad mine, it was installed by professionals! If someone managed to spot it and get around it... they clearly were not beginners!

Also!

Snipers saw just one man. And one man approached the wounded too, both survivors claim that quite confidently.

No, of course someone could have been sitting as backup, and the mortar bomber clearly did not walk the woods alone with his weapon. But in any case, it wasn’t a big team.

What kind of scumbags are they? Cheeky and experienced.

PMCs?

Doubtful... not their style. They don’t go in one at a time, there’s always cover. The soldiers are experienced, they always back each other up.

Scavs?

Yeah, with a mortar…

Two mines, both hitting right on target! Without a triangulation shot, it's worth noting.

Bandits?

That might be... there's a lot of smart guys among them.

But there's no known gangster named Predator. Who is this new character? And so brazen…

In any case, such impudence can't be forgiven!

Two groups had directly followed the retreating enemy. They knew their enemy was alone, because the tracks were clearly left by one person. Trackers in the groups were experienced and confirmed this with certainty. The mortars had not been found, but they could have been anywhere! A 50mm mortar is quite capable of throwing a mine even a few kilometres out. You try looking for it…

So, they focused on finding the person who approached the wounded. Three groups went to cut him off, blocking the way to the coast.

On the other hand, where would he go if he got there? Dig himself into the sand?

Although…

One man can easily hide. It's not like there's a dozen people with him that need to hide too!

That brings up another question: where is he going?

What, is he a fool? He doesn’t know the way?

Yeah, sure, and yet the sniper ambush was masterfully avoided. Not to mention subsequent events… this trick would have been hard to pull off without knowing the terrain. No, there’s clearly something else going on here...

Chapter 11

They’re gaining on me.

After a couple of hours, I see that quite clearly. So far, I’ve managed to get away from their scouts because none of them really thought to hide. Well, yeah... that distance is only manageable with a sniper rifle… but I don’t have one. And they don’t need one, the binoculars are enough. You see someone, guide the scouts, and just sit on your ass…

Winding between the hills, I always keep in mind the possibility of being discovered. Seems like I’ve seriously disturbed this anthill! Maybe I should have waited for a while. Sitting in my bunker, no one was after me with whips to my back, were they? Well, hindsight is 20/20…

Voices!

Shit, not far now.

Yeah, well, they have the advantage of numbers and don’t have anyone else to be afraid of. At least for now.

Let’s hope I don’t have to walk too far either.

Turn, one more…

“Hey! Stop!”

I dive into the grass and roll down the ravine.

Sound of stomping legs, several people running at once.

“What happened?!”

“Yeah, seems, uh... it’s, uh… Like something flashed.”

“Why didn’t you shoot?”

“Well… there was no one to shoot at…”

The person asking the questions swore, speculating furiously about the hapless observer, his parents and his loved ones.

“Baldy! Your three men, check that ravine over there!”

“Will do…”

“Long, you’re covering that grove. We’re gonna go straight.”

Okay, seems about right... they’re mostly moving forward. We’ve got the grove on the left and the ravine on the right, which is the one I need.

They’ll go ahead, and whoever saw me, where’s he gonna be? Nobody specifically mentioned him, so does that mean that he is not assigned to any group? Or did the orders include him too?

Let’s think…

Baldy and his three make four. Assume that Long also leads the same sized group…

Twelve people, three fours?

Mm-hmm... and the commander is running as part of one of them... Something isn’t fucking adding up!

«We’re gonna go straight…”

Nah... three fours and a commander makes more sense. Or even more likely, four groups of fours.

Half a platoon led by a deputy platoon leader, that's more serious.

All together it adds up to a reinforced platoon, with two deputies and a platoon leader, that's more believable. Yeah, it's not an actual army running after me. But the basic logic of combat control is understood by others, not just soldiers. I'm not the only one who read some smart books…

So there are four more sitting around here somewhere…

Twenty meters in front of me I hear feet walking, Baldy's group went to check the ravine. They won't get especially far. There, in a couple hundred meters, are the bodies of the shot-up Scavs... That's where the autonomous cannon stands on duty!

If they go any farther…

When the ammunition in the machine gun is depleted, the entrance will be discovered!

If that happens, I'll have to look for a new one. Hm, and I don't have my tablet with the pictures with me!

Where the hell am I gonna go, there's gonna be a whole bunch of angry guys with guns.

But no other move is gonna make things better for me. These raiders are tough guys and they won't let me off easy.

As I think about all this, I move quickly, following the group that's moved ahead. So far I'm lucky, the ones left behind are watching their backs more than ahead of them. Now I'm catching up with the four stomping along the ravine. On the plus side, the edges of the

ravine are pretty tall, so it’s not so easy to see what’s going on.

These raiders work in the American way, in pairs.

While one pair, covering for each other, walks forward, the other pair, behind cover, makes sure that no one shoots at their comrades.

Conceptually, it’s reasonable and smart.

Except, who told you that the shooting will be coming from the side you’re covering?

That’s right... nobody promised that!

Upon hearing quiet footsteps, the covering team didn’t realize what was happening right away. They must have decided that no one else could come up from behind, from their own side. They should have! If there were three of you, one would cover the back, and I wouldn’t be able to pull this trick...

The ZIG coughs quietly, and one of the members of the back pair falls. Got him!

The second, as if realizing something, abruptly turns back... to grab his stomach and drop his assault rifle. Does it hurt? Well, what did you expect…

I’d finish him... but that’s not part of my plan.

But I’m gonna kick his rifle away and pull his pistol out of the holster.

What if he gets a smart idea, huh?

If I don’t show negligence, I’ll live longer! Maybe…

I fire off several bullets!

The third member of the group falls to the sand!

The fourth one jumps quickly to the side, at the same time aiming his assault rifle.

The bolt recedes, the bullets are gone…

I hastily pull the spare magazine out of my vest.

But there's no one else to shoot anymore, the last opponent is sticking his face in the sand. I run up to him, push over his body with my foot…

Wow, that's lucky! He's wearing a bulletproof vest, it clearly shows the shots. At least five or six bullets hit him. Well, that didn't make him feel good. But the outcome of the shootout was decided by one bullet hitting just above the top edge of the plate, right in the throat. Really lucky...

With the first pair I shot, I aimed carefully, so the bulletproof vests didn't interfere much. The first took a bullet to the head, and the second got hit lower, in a spot not covered by the vest.

I didn't look to see where their third comrade was hit. There was already plenty of blood under him, the wound wasn't small, he wasn't gonna make it. The back of modern armor is usually less secure and I took this into account.

It's time, though, to walk away! Stop tempting fate, it may not be very understanding!

After staying put for a while, I run to the bottom of the ravine, where the dead bodies are. It's not very easy to run because my legs are wrapped with sleeves I cut from the raiders' shirts. What for? So there are no clear traces on the ground, read that in another good

book!

Judging by the smell, no one buried those dead men. Who would be so tidy here? In our unfriendly neighborhood? Most likely, you'd just lie down here forever...

Now, it's time to slow down. Who knows how the crafty security system would react to a running man?

When the heavy door clicked behind my back as it closed, I sat down straight on the floor, my legs weren't holding me up at all!

But there's no time to be sitting down! I have to hurry to the control panel and turn off the machine gun! All I needed was for it to go off…

***

"So, what do we have here?" Ivan Mikheev, aptly nicknamed "Ivan the Terrible," looked at the group commanders with disdain.

There was reason to be gloomy, the raiders hadn't had losses like this in quite a long time! They weren't just worried about not being cool, their toughness was the reason most gangs, not to mention the Scavs, preferred to detour around their territory. The group was notable for its vindictiveness and habit of revenge. That's why, by the way, they were called raiders — it was standard for them to make a deep incursion into "foreign» territory to punish someone that pissed them off. And they did it fairly often...

So the gloomy reputation of these groups (despite the single name, there was no single leadership here either) was based on actual events. Anyone, even a leader of a fairly serious gang, would have thought five times before making these scumbags his opponents.

And then all of a sudden…

Just under ten dead! It’s a shitty start to the day…

“Show me!” Ivan the Terrible takes a decisive step forward.

They had to walk pretty far, the scene of the crime wasn’t very close to the road. But they got there…

“Shots were fired from here,» the escort nodded at the scattering of the spent cartridges. “Some kind of submachine gun that shoots Luger cartridges. With a silencer, none of the wounded heard anything, all while he fired almost three dozen bullets.”

“What, were they without armor?”

“They had armor, that’s why two of them survived. The first one got hit with a few bullets right in his ass, there’s no armor covering anything down there. And it exited through the belly, he was lying down... But he’s lucky... he survived somehow, although the doctor says that won’t last long. The second one had six shots in the back, two punctures. This one, if you trust the doctor, will survive.”

“And the others?” The ringleader wanted to know.

“One in the back of the head and one in the throat. There was no way... By the way…» the one conducting the tour pulled some wrinkled bullets out of his pocket. “Look at this! They’re a bit weird... heavy, non-standard…”

The heads of the wrinkled bullets still showed traces of blue paint.

“What are your thoughts on that?”

“I looked at the casings — definitely foreign! Not ours.”

“USECs, then?”

“Doesn’t look like it… They don’t work like that... there was one shooter, I’m confident! I saw the tracks, and the shell casings are all in one general spot…”

“There was a lone one in the ravine near the snipers, not a crowd…» The ringleader grinned unkindly. “What, did some lonely man give us this headache?”

The tour guide caught his breath.

“Smoky is right!” The leader of the team, who was silent up to that point, spoke up. “It doesn’t seem like this was set up on purpose!”

“Okay then!” Ivan the Terrible smiled. “Explain…”

“He didn’t have to shoot at all, the guys already passed him. There was nothing to threaten this asshole!”

“He didn’t have to!” The ringleader nodded. “But he did! Why?”

“I think the boys pinned someone down there,» the raider nodded deep into the ravine. “Or, they could have pinned someone down. And this one shot, I think, to redirect attention from whoever was further down…”

“That’s a hell of a fucking distraction!” Ivan grinned. “Two body bags!”

“He could have finished off the wounded, no one was there to stop him,” the team leader objected. “But, he didn’t…»

“Why?”

“Well, you didn’t let me talk!” The scout took the floor again. “One of them, the one who got shot in the ass, remembered something!”

“Remembered what?” The ringleader turned sharply towards him. “Why didn’t you say something?!”

“Well, you were busy mocking us…”

“So?”

“He said... he didn’t even say it, kind of hissed… ‘You were told, do not follow us!’”

“That’s it?!”

“Yes…”

“Okay…” Terrible chilled off a little. “Come on, let’s take a look…”

However, they didn’t have to go far – the ravine ended in a dead end. And except for a few very stale dead bodies, there was nobody and nothing there. However, one place on the ground had dents from boxes. And judging by the depth of the dents, they were quite heavy. Certainly not for cigarettes…

And that’s it!

Nobody from the cordon and scouting teams saw anyone leave here. Especially not with cargo.

With a heavy heart, Ivan the Terrible got in touch with other raider leaders, telling them what had happened. The threat clearly did not concern just him, the unknown shooters could now appear anywhere.

“The heads of these assholes will be paid for generously!” he emphasized at the end of the conversation. “And if they’re living... you get it! Also, you have to be careful! They’re not some amateurs!”

Chapter 12

It wasn’t over yet.

After a short time, Ivan the Terrible was suddenly called for over the radio.

“What the hell?” The ringleader was curious. “It’s already night!”

“So what… There’s a visitor for you!”

“What kind of visitor? I’m not expecting anybody!”

“He knows,” the speaker crackled. “But he says you’ll find out soon enough.”

“Well... Okay, fuck it! Bring him in…”

But then, a cloaked figure with a hood over his face appeared in the doorway under the protection of his personal «guard.» The usually imperturbable ringleader rose from his seat.

“Who the hell is that?! Why are you covering your face?”

The guest gestured to the security guard who was racing towards him to stop and threw his hood back, uncovering his face.

Man... in his 40s, pale. Why is he pale?

“And who the ever-living fuck are you?” Ivan asks, a bit more quietly this time.

“I’m a Priest. My name is Peter.”

“Yeah... one of these…”

“Yes, I’m a Witness. We need to talk, boss…”

Sectarians were not allies. Although, frankly, even the raiders weren’t always allies to each other. But Terrible was not in a hurry to start the conversation with hostility, even though there were enough reasons for it…

“Did you check him for guns? He’s not packing, is he?” The ringleader shot a quick look at his guards.

“Only a knife,» one of them showed the confiscated blade. “There is nothing else.”

“Okay... give it here! And you, little guest, sit down, no good conversation happens when standing. Would you like a drink?”

“Water.”

“Hey, get him some water!”

Soon, a sealed plastic bottle of water appeared on the table in front of the guest. He took a good look at it, nodded and opened it. He sniffed it, took a few sips and placed the bottle on the table. During this time, the boss looked over his unexpected guest, making no attempt to start a conversation.

“You’re in no hurry,» the priest nodded. “That’s good…”

“Well, unlike some, I’m at home. So what’s the reason to hurry then? You and I aren’t friends, to say the least, and you know it. But you came... So you need something. And need it badly! So you tell me, I’ll listen.”

Peter weaved his thin fingers together and swung back and forth in the chair several times.

“You recently had an altercation…”

“There’s plenty of them here every day. So what?”

“You lost a few people. And there was a word uttered on the radio — Predator…”

“Are you listening to our connection?”

The priest nodded.

“Not just yours. It’s useful to know about everything that’s happening. But let’s not walk around in circles — what happened between you and him? You battled, and we know it. We also know that he killed your men and walked away.”

“What do you care about that?”

The guest briefly explained — this man (or the group of people behind him) is their enemy. And for his head the Witnesses are willing to pay well. If he’s still alive, the amount will triple. This is where the interests of raiders and sectarians coincide, and the Witnesses are ready to provide any assistance they can in solving this issue.

“So what did he do to you?” The boss smirked.

“Not just us. He’s a killer — cold-blooded and violent. Killed Foma, Makar, and some other gang leaders. Killed Bears and USECs. And many others…”

“And he’s still alive? That’s damn lucky, I wonder why!”

“That’s what we want to know, too.”

“Well, then talk to the gangsters, they’re all over the place!” Ivan offered his advice.

“I met with them,» the priest nodded again. “Anticipating your question, I also met with BEARs and USECs too.”

“So?”

“They’re afraid…”

Terrible couldn’t hold it any longer and laughed out loud. The door opened and one of the guards looked into the room. The boss waved his hand, and the guard returned to his post.

“Oh, boy, that’s funny…» The ringleader wiped the tears from his eyes. “It’s been a long time since I laughed like that!”

“It’s not funny,» the guest replied calmly. “I wouldn’t be so surprised if he came here one day for your head.”

“If he’s tired of being alive, let him come.”

“Mitay’s group consisted of about fifty men. He killed everyone. He also killed three dozen slaves for good measure…”

“Why would he go after them?”

“Predator…” shrugged Peter.

“You’re shitting me.”

“Ask the traders, they know a lot about this case. Are you familiar with Foma?”

“Not personally. But I heard about him, a serious and tough dude!”

“The Predator entered his home, full of armed men and guards. He lived there for several days, but no one saw him. Then he blew up the guard barracks and shot Foma, along with all those who were with him. Are you still laughing?”

***

“Here,» the guide nodded. “That’s where he fired from.”

The priest stopped, took a good look around. He sat down, mulling something over…

“Your men, as I understand, approached from that direction?”

“Yes,» the guide nodded. “We placed some sticks where they fell…”

As he answered, he glanced at the ringleader, but the boss nodded calmly to say that he did everything right, well done!

The cultist walked along the ravine for some time, inspected the place where the crates had left their mark. He climbed up the hill, plucked a monocular from somewhere in his robes, and began to look closely at something. Nodded and placed the optics back where he fished it from.

“No one came back this way later?”

“Checkpoints didn’t see anybody.”

“I see…”

“And what exactly do you see?” Ivan the Terrible couldn’t help asking.

The priest stepped a little to the side, to the location of a tree that fell over ages ago, and made a gesture, telling the boss to sit down next

to him.

“Wait here...» the ataman said to his men. He walked towards the tree.

He sat down, adjusted the assault rifle hanging on his shoulder and inquired: “Well?»

“He went underground. In that direction!” The priest gestured towards the ground.

“What do you mean? Did he fall into some kind of pit?”

“There’s a network of underground passages on the coast, we’ve been looking for them. Most likely the Predator knows how to enter them.”

“Let’s get my guys and check the walls of the ravine. I seriously doubt that this entrance is the size of a trash can, they aren’t crawling in there, are they?”

“I think it’s a lot bigger... But why do you have so many unnecessary people?”

The boss didn’t understand the question... It took him a minute before he finally got it!

“There’s no useless ballast among my boys! And we have doctors, in case anything happens! What, are there anti-tank mines at the entrance?”

“I doubt it…” The cultist shook his head. “I don’t think they were planning on entering on a tank... at least not here! So there’s probably no mines at the door. But half a hundred kilograms of TNT — that’s possible!”

“Fifty kilo? What the fuck do you need that much for?”

“To collapse the tunnel securely.”

The cultist explained that it’s not the first time they found all manner of incomprehensible passages deep underground. They are different, and not always the right ones, but most of them are booby-trapped with multiple layers of mines.

Any attempt to enter without authorization usually leads to the tunnel collapsing, safely hiding the contents of the tunnels under a multi-meter layer of dirt, as well as crushing anyone that tried to get in.

Ivan nodded. There have been stories about dungeons on the coast for a long time. And everyone who mentioned them said the same thing — it’s better not to go in there! No one had ever climbed back out... There was not a single case he could remember of anyone boasting that they’ve had a successful trip into these dark tunnels.

Ivan noted that it might have been more logical to try and break through the debris after, because everything would have already exploded. There’s a way to dig deeper into the tunnel itself.

The priest sighed.

“If it were that simple... There are people in these dungeons. We tried to break through the rubble and even dug further down the tunnel. We even managed to get into some undamaged tunnels!”

“Well, there you go!” nodded the ataman. “What did I say?!”

“And it all ended with new explosions. There’s someone out there watching... And not letting anyone else in.”

“Even now?”

“What’s the problem? They’ve got food and water, I guess. There are no threats, they can spend years down there!”

“Okay. So what do you need these dungeons for?”

“You wouldn’t understand... that’s our service!”

And that’s it, the priest didn’t say anything else on the topic.

But he did offer a solution.

He’s prepared to send experienced diggers here. Fuck knows how the cultist found them in Tarkov! But they can definitely find the entrance. Of course, they’re not planning to bury themselves under the rubble. There is equipment that can find underground voids. And then, far away from the supposed entrance, they will make a search tunnel. This way, they might avoid the traps at the front door. The main thing is understanding the protection system — what do the charges react to? Who controls it and how? If you can figure this out, then you can think about exploring the dungeons.

“Well, I understand why you need this, you have your service ... But what the fuck do we need this for? There’s plenty to do above ground,» the boss shrugged his shoulders.

The priest took several steps and stopped at the marks from the crates on the ground. Ivan, together with his escort (who approached the men after the end of the conversation), followed him.

“What do you think these marks are?”

“Who the fuck knows…”

“These were left by crates. Heavy, since they left such deep dents, the ground is not that soft! Tell me, do you know a lot of places around this location, where big heavy crates could be?”

“Certainly not here. Closer to the lighthouse and further maybe…”

“Commander!” ...the guide spoke up. “Some time ago Limpy’s boys were chasing some gangsters. And those guys were dragging some crates from our territory…”

“And?!” Peter and the cultist turned to the speaker in sync.

“Nothing... they didn’t come back. They went into town, and…”

“All right!” nodded Ivan. “Send your diggers!”

***

I’ve been wandering around these tunnels for three days now.

Some of them seem to have been abandoned a long time ago. In any case, these tunnels are blocked by fences which are very difficult to get past. Most of these tunnels go somewhere deep into the ground. I don’t have any desire to head in that direction.

The only positive news is that I’ve managed to establish a connection with Oleg — for that I had to go to town on the local computer. The result — the technician was able to get into the local network and then went quiet for a long time, to think things through, I guess.

He didn’t get back in touch until a day later, and with a whole bunch of news. First, he was able to get control over some of the security cameras. Although so far, there’s no one to keep an eye on. Most of the cameras show parts of the dungeons where nothing’s happening.

Three cameras, however, are obviously behind the hidden entrances. After I transfer these images to my computer, I try to

understand what I'm looking for. Well... one place I recognize, it's near the roadblock on the coast. It's a long way from here, about three kilometers…

On the second camera I see the sanatorium building, but from some strange angle. I don't know this place. I'll dig into this later…

On camera three is a forest. Some hills, a creek... fuck knows where it might be... somewhere near a rural village, I can make out a piece of road there. The road is distinctive in that area!

I'm trying to pinpoint the coordinates... Well, I'm getting somewhere... Whatever, this will be a puzzle for later!

On the second day I managed to find where the crates that were brought to the control room were stored... A dead-end tunnel, part of it fenced off by a brick wall. The wall has a solid iron door locked with an ordinary padlock.

A short burst of gunfire, and the mangled lock flies off to the side.

I examine the door, there might be all sorts of surprises here…

But no, there's nothing here, just a regular lock, nothing more. No wires, no switches…

The brick wall was obviously built later then the tunnel wall — there are still a bunch of bricks nearby and a dried up bag of mortar. There is also a wooden box where the mortar was once prepared. The walls of the tunnel are concrete, and this structure is made from ordinary red bricks.

While it looks simple, I don't want to take any chances. I tie a long rope to the door handle and get as far away as I possibly can.

Pull!

Rusty hinges squeak... that's it.

In the lantern's beam I can see the open door. Let's wait a little... fuck knows what's behind the door.

Nope, nothing happens.

It's a dead end, no tunnel.

And there's those wooden crates on the floor.

Varied ones, gigantic and smaller ones.

There are no locks on them, and there shouldn't be any surprises inside either.

And what do we have here?

The anti-tank rifle goes to the side, not needed.

Wow, canned food! Why is it in the armory? Excuse me, who said it was an armory? The cans are in thick, even sometimes hardened grease, but still a little rusty. Well, I can put those aside... there's food in here without them! And there's water near the control room, there's a tap in the bathroom.

7.62-39 cartridges, quite a lot. There's ten crates of them. That's not too bad... but I'm not gonna shoot carbines, am I? There's five crates of those here, too.

After a few hours I'm slumped down on the floor, exhausted. I should recharge the batteries in the flashlight, the light is barely visible… It's a good thing I brought a spare flashlight from the hall... Old, basically an antique, but it works! The light is weak, but it's still light! Yes... they knew how to make things back in the USSR!

It’s okay!

I’ll come back here tomorrow!

And there’s good reason to!

There’s an impressive machine by the door — a machine gun on wheels! Even has a shield! Man, it was quite a task to clean off the grease, and put it together, you wouldn’t believe… (Why did I do that, by the way?) There’s also ammo in the crates, as well as ribbons...

But all this became substantially less important after I talked to Oleg.

When I turned on the computer and got in touch with him, he looked very tense.

“Why are you so sour?”

“Yeah, I’m just... getting into the control grid... you know, the humidity sensors and stuff.”

“And so what? Is there going to be a landslide or something?”

“No…” Oleg seems to be looking for the right words.

From his words it becomes clear to me that some control networks began behaving some «wrong» way… and all of these problems were strictly localized. And the worst thing was that this point was very close to me.

“Where is it happening?”

“Well, judging by the map you gave me here, it’s a tunnel.”

“Which one?”

“B2 on your map.”

I click over to the map… where is it…

Aha!

“Yeah, there it is... Dead end there, ceiling collapsed. A while back.. it’s all mossy by now. It led above ground somewhere, I guess there was an emergency exit.”

So... what the fuck, pray tell me? What the fuck is going on up there?

“What’s the anomaly?”

Turns out there’s a number of tunnels that have special sensors that respond to soil movement, vibration and such. And they’re pretty precise.

“These are modern systems, I even know the guys who installed them,» says Oleg. “By the way, you’re absolutely right about the landslides, they happen quite often. Water is nearby... There were even victims, so management came to the conclusion that it was necessary to have some warning system, to avoid or at least predict possible accidents. So they laid cables along the walls... They are very sensitive, and they monitor the movements of the soil.”

“Okay, movements… Understood… What’s happening there now?”

“I don’t understand. It’s like someone is using force... the system captures shocks and tremors from time to time.”

“You really made me happy…”

***

Didn’t sleep well. Fuck knows exactly why, but I was uneasy. So in the morning after a quick snack, I’m gonna turn on the automatic security system in full. Fuck, gotta be careful…

To be safe, I install an additional charge in the tunnel, 50 meters from the front door, in case the explosion does not blow up the front door. I do not think too hard, and just stretch a two-beam (what fancy words I know!) across the corridor.

I leave a mark on the wall so as not to miss it inadvertently.

Bad examples are contagious, and soon after I’m dragging a few crates of old hand grenades from the warehouse. RG-42, even though they’re old, they can still hurt.

Three trips and at the turn towards the aforementioned corridor is a stack of crates. At first glance (and at the second too) this amount is quite enough to collapse the ceiling and walls in this dead end. And considering the fact that the ceiling had already collapsed (though not right here) ... I think the destruction will be quite massive.

I drag the boxes into the niche in the wall where there used to be a post (even the remains of a table survived) and stack them. There’s another brick wall across the corridor, just like in a warehouse! There used to be a door there at one point…

Now the question is — how do I explode all this?

It wouldn’t make sense to just put a normal tripmine (yeah, with half a kilo of explosives behind my back...). I walk back into the warehouse. Let’s dig around…

But there is nothing useful there, and building a remote controlled mine doesn’t seem feasible. Shit... what to do?

If one of my teachers from the warehouse saw me now, they'd probably just say I'm insane, overworked…

I sit and use a handheld drill (from the stocks left by repairmen in the operating room) to make holes in a wood board. I smash it with a hammer, straightening the nails that I pulled out of some drawers.

What the fuck am I doing that for?

I have an idea…

By evening, the work was finished (and the flashlight was dying again...). Across the doorway was a wooden shield. Kinda crooked, but well, I am not a carpenter, alas… In spite of its appearance, the structure turned out to be strong, couldn't be pushed over. Now there is a cable leading to the rings of three grenades. Three's for good measure, one alone would probably do the trick. When this thing falls to the ground, its weight will be quite enough to pull these rings out.

When that happens, I don't envy anybody in the vicinity — several boxes of grenades are capable of tearing down more than just a weak brick wall!

Malicious thoughts have captured me so tightly that I drop by the warehouse and grab a tarpaulin bag (and it's surprisingly not rotten!) with large caliber ammunition. I also throw a few empty machine-gun ribbons over my shoulder. Before I go to bed, I'll fill them…

Here's a question — what the fuck is up with this circus? Two solid explosive charges should be enough to stop any group of attackers before they dig through the rubble…

Stock up on canned food and grenades and get the fuck out of here! Although then I'd have to blow up the control panel... But that's okay, Oleg has already gotten control of the system, and he doesn't need my help anymore — there's more than one control panel here, as it

turns out... It's a pity, really, to lose my usual passage... It's okay, though, I hope that I'll find a new one, I know where to look.

But no!

I'm sitting there like some Landsknecht, stuffing the machine gun ribbon with large caliber ammunition. Although I don't imagine they used machine guns…

Before I go to bed, I fill four ribbons, fifty rounds each. It's difficult... and the ribbons are new, the ammo doesn't go in easily. Okay... that's enough! Enough for what?! Who the hell is there to fight? Especially with a large-caliber machine gun that was made before I was born... My ZIG should be enough! Not enough distance to use a heavy weapon.

Oleg was seriously concerned today. According to him, this one doesn't look like any natural phenomena anymore. It's looking more human by the hour.

"I think you should get out of there! Don't linger! Who the hell knows who's trying to get in."

"Okay…"

He's right!

"I'm just gonna recharge my flashlights, they're almost out of juice. I'm walking around in the dark, mind you! I'll put another charge and scram! Sorry, I'll put explosives on the control panel too."

"Fuck it! I don't need it anymore!"

Chapter 13

“Why didn’t you start digging in the ravine, huh?” Ivan the Terrible watched with interest as several cultists dug with picks and shovels in the pit. “Didn’t you tell me that guy went in that direction somewhere?”

“And I’m ready to say that again,» the priest nodded. “Except I’m afraid is that the entrance is somehow protected against unwanted invasion. I’m sure there’s a mine. And this is where the depth sensors show a void near the surface. I think there used to be an entrance here…”

There was some logic to this. Almost right next to the pit there used to be a machine pillbox, covered by dirt. There had been no weapons there for a long time, and the pillbox itself was not found immediately, but only after some digging. Peter suggested that the pillbox covered the backup exit. But, for some unknown reason, it was disarmed and covered with dirt. The entrance was most likely nearby. Or it exited somewhere in the area covered by this gunfire.

It was impossible to tell at this point.

Either way, the cultist diggers weren’t looking for the location of the former entrance, instead beginning to break into the tunnel. Judging by how skillfully they operated their tools, it was not the first time they did work like this. At certain intervals they stopped, climbed out and another cultist descended with some special equipment. He’d sit there for a long time, carefully looking for something.

“What’s he doing down there?” Ivan asked at one point.

“He’s looking for traces of any tech. If the dungeon is inhabited, then there could be ventilation systems or water pumps. In that case we would have to be prepared for any sort of surprise.”

“I see...» nodded the raider leader.

In recent days, he had received a «small» reinforcement, some «kind» help from his cohorts in trade. It served as a form of unobtrusive control — what are you doing there, our friend? Without our knowledge, by the way? It must be assumed that the unexpected (albeit situational and temporary) alliance with the sectarians had puzzled other raider leaders. And probably many others as well…

But everyone seemed to have stopped short of showing obvious disrespect and openly expressing suspicions. But even Ivan the Terrible couldn’t refuse the «friendly» help…

Closer to lunch, the diggers’ shovels scraped something solid. They stopped working, cleared the bottom…

Concrete.

Apparently, it’s the wall of some kind of dungeon.

“So, what’s up?” Ivan the Terrible looked into the hole. “We’re gonna blow it up, or what?”

“Now they’re going to drill boreholes, lay the explosives and blow them up,” said the priest calmly. “Why? Do you want to get in there first?”

“Well... I do have a group ready…”

“Let me ask you, do your people have much experience operating underground?”

“Not really... Why is that so important?”

“How can I put it…” The cultist shrugged. “An attack could come

from anywhere. And it could be anything. Yes, I think we avoided the trap in the ravine, but what's waiting for us down there? I don't insist, though. You can send your men."

"Let your men go first...» Ivan mumbled as he stepped aside. "And my squad will follow."

Although was it really his squad…

Almost half of the detachment, about twenty men, consisted of those that allegedly came to help ... None of the leaders were happy at the prospect that such an interesting and basically legendary object as the coastal dungeons would be «seized» by a single group. Yeah, everyone here is, together, sort of… but, still! The cultists barely counted, their squad was very small. And by the look of it, they were workers rather than serious fighters. Of course they had weapons – no one had travelled without them for some time here. Even to the bathroom... But seriously considering a small group armed mostly with shotguns as opponents? They masterfully dig pits of all sorts, nobody could argue with that. But what are they like in battle…

Nobody considered them anything more than «cannon fodder."

Whistle!

A cultist standing by the pit raised his hand.

On this signal a dozen of his comrades, who had exchanged shovels and crowbars for shotguns, hit the ground.

"The fuse was set on fire,» the priest explained to the ringleader. "About twenty seconds…"

The explosion sounded somehow hollow, and a cloud of dust sprayed out above the pit.

“Shall we go?” The raider turned to the cultist.

“Let’s wait... there could be landslides. We don’t know how strong the vault is. And, the air has to clear after the explosion, it’s impossible to breathe down there now.”

***

The echo of the distant explosion came from somewhere deep in the halls, bouncing against the walls and hallway turns.

Oleg was right — somebody was digging there for a reason!

I bend towards the console.

Three dozen hand grenades are already hidden in the console (in the frame of the whole structure — it is quite big), and I used the ordinary cooling fan as the blast mechanism. As long as the equipment of the console is turned off, it will not go off. Nothing is heating up, is it?

But if you just press the power button, the temperature will rise a little bit.

And sooner or later the temperature sensor will be triggered and run the cooling fan. And then it’ll wind up a few centimeters of thread, which, in turn, will pull the pin from the grenade…

I wouldn’t want to be near this console at that point…

I also switch on the automatic protection, there is no need to hide or protect it anymore. If the enemy comes from inside the tunnels, they’ll find it anyway. But if they arrive from the outside too, then I don’t envy them.

I take a close look at everything for the last time. I don’t seem to

have screwed up, or left any trace…

The flashlights are charged, there's water and food in my backpack, I haven't forgotten anything I brought here... I can walk away!

***

"Let's go!"

Several shadows slipped into the breach quickly.

Diggers, huh… but they're moving very professionally! Yes... it seems that some «comrades» were too quick to count them out as non-threatening!

A second... another one, and the dark hole swallowed up the leading group.

For a while, nothing happens. Then suddenly the priest's radio comes to life.

"The tunnel is empty. Looks like it's abandoned. On the right, ten meters away is a turn. I'm sending two brothers there for reconnaissance."

"What's to the left?" asked Peter.

"Another turn, but thirty meters away. Bad visibility, dust still hanging in the air, our lights do not reach far."

"Send intelligence to the turn and wait! I believe that the rest of the dungeon is in that direction. Do nothing, wait for backup. Look around! There could be traps!"

"We see a cable duct under the ceiling, the wires were cut by the explosion."

“Got it!” The cultist turned to Ivan. “What he’s trying to say is that if anybody received any information from this tunnel, they can’t now. Usually in such cases an on-duty repair team is dispatched to determine the exact location of the malfunction or find damage to the cable. That’s who we want to capture… These people might know a lot about the dungeons! And because of that… I would ask your people not to make too much noise, we might be heard!”

“Hah!” The ataman smiled. “After your explosion? Because it was so quiet!”

“The explosions could happen for any reason.” The leader of the cultists wasn’t thrown off. “The people underground don’t care much about what’s going on aboveground, believe me! But of course, you may send your men down... but don’t let them get too loud…”

The crowd of raiders were looking forward to this moment and immediately went down.

But not everyone…

Two or three people hang back, and without even hiding their actions, take out their walkie-talkies.

“Well, that’s it…” Ivan the Terrible thought longingly. “Now a whole crowd will arrive... they smell the prey!”

But he couldn’t stop them in any way. All that remained was to get ahead, so he gave the order to notify the other atamans, informing them that a way into the dungeons was found, and that his team was working to clear it. Basically, cordially inviting anyone willing to participate in the investigation of the discovered object.

That’s it!

Neutral and no one is obliged to do anything. What questions are left? Ivan honestly told everyone about the discovery, and would give anyone a separate special warning about any possible trouble. And no motherfucker could say he did anything wrong!

Who knows, maybe this will turn out good! In any case he is the first (and so far, the only!) raider leader that has managed to even get cultists to work in his interest!

And so, Ivan carefully instructed the leader of the expeditionary group.

“Watch everything! Do not go anywhere first! Everything interesting is to be reported immediately!”

Now Ivan can wash his hands of this, no one could influence the events that were to follow…

The raiders that went underground have piled up close to the breach. It was somewhat calmer there, the light was falling from above, and that inspired some confidence. Although the rope ladder hanging from above didn’t inspire much confidence as a means of quick escape in case of trouble. There were no fools here, everyone knew very well that climbing it under fire from the enemy was almost impossible. It’s just two or three meters, but... come on, you try to do that when deadly lead is flying in all directions through the tunnel!

So the raiders scattered along the walls, and some even laid on the floor.

No one was going to go into the dark without a plan.

That’s not how the cultists acted.

They didn’t have any discussions, as if each one of them had been properly instructed in advance.

They greeted the first raiders, holding the lower part of the stairs, showed them around, where everything was, and then brandished their shotguns and disappeared into the darkness. Emphasizing that the raiders were not advised to shoot in their direction…

It was here, by the way, that things began to make sense to even the extra dense comrades…

Straight tunnels underground aren't that common. At least not long straight sections... As a rule, it's straight about fifty meters or less, and then the passage turns or pitches down. Or even up, any direction is possible. What's more, from time to time there's fences with embrasures. It's the same reinforced concrete as the walls. They're seemingly built just to combat anyone that makes unauthorized underground walks…

Under these conditions the advantage in range and speed of fire is not that important. What the hell is a range advantage worth if you can't shoot further than fifty meters straight? Your bullet will ricochet around the corner, and then what? It's good if there's some dope standing there, they'll get shot, justifiably. And if there isn't anyone standing there? It's utterly useless if you put a dozen bullets in the same spot in the wall.

But a shotgun…

You don't even have to aim it.

Stick it around the corner and shoot along the corridor!

Shotgun or canister pellets cover the part of the corridor where the advancing team is walking. You don't have to worry about headshots, they'll happen on their own when the owner of the head gets shot in his leg and falls to the floor. For nobody can fly, everybody walks with their legs. So just shoot at about half a meter above the floor, someone will definitely get hit!

These hoodlums aren’t that dumb.

So the raiders did not mind that the cultists left them at the breach and hurried along deep into the tunnel.

But very soon one group came back.

“It’s a dead end,» said the elder. “There must have been a passage at one point, but it collapsed and there’s nowhere to go. But there are some closed rooms... you can check them out.”

“What about you?” one of the raiders asked.

“We’ll head further. Some of the dungeon dwellers might be arriving soon. They must have noticed the explosion and the collapse of the ceiling. So... we’ll greet them…»

The fact they were unlikely to meet the enemy thoroughly encouraged the raiders. Leaving a couple of men at the entrance, the rest cheerfully went deep into the dark passage. Not everybody had flashlights, so some lit up the torches they made ahead of time. It didn’t take long to get to the destination, the first door was found about fifty meters ahead.

They didn’t overthink it, they hit the door with their shoulders and it cracked, as expected.

Alas... except for a dozen cans of long-dried paint, there was nothing in the room.

But that’s fine!

There’s something else ahead!

And this time they were luckier, the next room was a warehouse of

communications equipment. Field phones, cable coils, some crates…

That’s already something!

A dozen men immediately dragged these goods towards the exit. The rest of them headed further.

The third door turned out to be iron.

It wasn’t sealed, which was good! But still a tough nut to crack…

The problem was solved fairly simply — two TNT drilling draughts were attached to the door hinges. It’s not a safe door... should be enough!

It was... one hinge was cut off, and the other basically fell apart.

A few minutes of hard work, a lot of swearing…

“What the hell is this shit?”

There was no other way to describe what they saw.

Metal table, same closet in the corner. Two chairs that have fallen apart from age. And an incomprehensible control panel…

Some light bulbs, round instruments, tumblers, and switches. The signs on the panel didn’t mean anything to anyone. «Temperature at facility H7,» «Control grid E3»... and so on. None of it worked, there was no voltage. The light bulb under the ceiling was intact, but it didn’t respond to the switch. The phone on the table didn’t respond to anything either.

“It’s all as ancient as mammoth shit!”

Most likely it was — all the devices looked old. 40 years old, at least.

“Check the closet!”

Alas, except for a couple of notebooks, there was nothing there. The notebooks seem to have been lying here since time immemorial. The paper had turned yellow, the ink dried up and faded.

There were no more doors — a hundred more steps later the corridor was blocked by rubble. Pieces of concrete, rebar sticking out... there’s no way through.

“Let’s go back! Maybe the fucking clowns found something else.”

Chapter 14

The fucking clowns, as the raider eloquently put it, did find something.

A brick wall was blocking the hallway. Once upon a time it had a door, currently replaced by a hastily made wooden shield. And it didn't look like it could even open at all, the hall was sealed tight.

It wasn't any problem to tear this obstacle to pieces, but... the cultists didn't do that for some reason.

"Waiting for something?" asked the senior raider.

"There's no way through, and, judging by the shield, no one's likely to come from here, this part of the dungeon has been blocked."

"So what?"

"So, there may be some kind of trap on the other side, we've seen that before."

"So tie a rope and pull it, it'll take five minutes…"

The cultist, shaking his head, explained.

First, the shield is built well, and no rope could pull it out. You needed tools — to cut it, for example, or drill, or saw…

Second, and most importantly, the trap could be several kilos of explosives, and then it's trouble for everyone…

The raider's next question — what to do —was answered immediately.

The cultists suggested making another passageway to the side from the existing opening. It is very likely that the mine (if there was one at all) was set off by the shield. And it wouldn't react to a wall being deconstructed. Or in any case it shouldn't...

"And how long will it take?"

"If we're quiet, around two hours."

"How about you do it faster?"

The cultist nodded at the wooden shield.

"You can start right away. But I'm sorry, me and my guys are gonna get as far away as we can…"

The raider did not argue with him and strutted back to his comrades with a serious look on his face.

"He says that the higher ups have already agreed that these motherfuckers will break the wall. And we'll wait…"

***

Turning towards the tunnels I hadn't explored, where my supplies were stored, I stop.

The explosion was almost two hours ago.

We can, of course, assume that it was just an accident.

But then what's up with the work supposedly carried out in that area in the past few days, according to the technician and his equipment? A coincidence? It didn't look much like it was natural (sure, a natural phenomena occurring at clearly defined intervals, only when it's light outdoors). So, no coincidences, the explosion happened very much

in the right place. And I had a rough idea where that was. Oleg also helped pinpoint it…

Theoretically I could have gone there before... but why?

This tunnel is still blocked by a wall. And I booby-trapped the only passage. I don't really feel like taking the explosives, frankly…

But it's been two hours!

Of course the guests have likely reached the rubble blocking the tunnel, and this probably did not make them happy.

They've likely found the wall with the nailed doorway.

So why didn't anything explode?

Sure, chiseling concrete, that's easy!

But breaking through some wood is too difficult?

Oh, I don't believe that…

And that's why I head back.

Upon reaching the warehouse I leave my backpack behind a corner, and then I roll out an old but still very formidable tool — a DShK, my heavy machine gun.

Full ribbons are right next to it, I grab them all at once.

It's about three hundred meters to the turn.

The wheels of the machine gun are making a light racket on the uneven floor, the flashlight beam is dancing on the walls and ceiling, it's all utterly surreal. There is no lighting in the control room, this

tunnel leads to a dead end. You have to think that's the reason why they didn't upgrade the lighting system.

There's a lot of cubbies like that.

I haven't been able to determine the purpose of these dungeons yet. Not warehouses, that's obvious.

A transport system? That's also doubtful, it's not like you'd carry things by hand. And I haven't seen any rail tracks either…

What was this architectural marvel for?

It was definitely not made out of love for the art of digging…

But I haven't found any other purpose yet.

I hear the sound of the drill from afar...

Whoa, these guys aren't idiots! They didn't just break through the fence. Or I would have heard the resulting explosion from basically anywhere!

Should I get the hell out of here?

That's an option, of course... especially considering another "gift» can be found a couple of hundred meters down the line.

But…

Now these smart guys are gonna break through the wall, come in and look around. Clearly, they'll find my improvised mine. And they'll be much more careful from that point forward! It's not guaranteed they're gonna stumble over the next one. A game of catch-up in these dark dungeons does not really inspire me, the end game of that is obvious. There's just more of them, no matter how many

people are behind the wall.

After they discover the old warehouse full of weapons, they will not leave easily! They'll follow me. They have no reason to love me, but they have plenty of reasons to be angry with me. They won't let me go... And sooner or later they'll catch up.

At least I have a good position here. And a whole armory behind me! I can inflict some real pain!

I lay down on the floor and set the machine gun's horizontal aim — there had to be a reason I've been studying the instructions all day! Now we understand what's going on…

But I really should have equipped a few more ribbons!

But on the other hand, 200 rounds of a serious caliber... nothing to laugh at for the guys on the other side, that's for sure. It's not a thick wall. You can't take it down with your shoulder, and you couldn't even really damage it with a submachine gun. Even an assault rifle is most likely no match.

But 12.7mm bullets will make easy work of it!

***

"What's the fucking holdup?" One of the raiders turned to the head of the group. "Give it a couple of whacks with a crowbar and that'll do it!"

"Sure, that would work,» he agreed. "I think someone's really gone insane with caution! I'll go and report… And we can use the crowbar ourselves if they're too scared!"

The militants supported him with some friendly cackling. Everyone has long forgotten how recently they were surprised by the skills of

the miners. In their eyes, they now looked like cowards, being way too careful.

Feeling the support from most of his squad, the leader stood up, threw an assault rifle over his shoulder and adjusted his jacket. Now he's going to tell them…

Nobody really understood what was happening.

Suddenly, there was dust in the flashlight beams, the wall was splashed with shards of broken brick. The cultists disappeared instantly and rolled away like pins in a bowling alley.

But the raiders didn't have time to understand what was happening before the lead hail cut through their ranks too, as the bodies of the cultists were no longer stopping the bullets. Although, frankly, they weren't that great at stopping them before either…

The tunnel here was straight and it didn't turn anywhere. Nor was there any change in elevation. The nearest turn you could hide behind, at least to some extent, was about sixty meters away.

Which had to be traversed somehow…

No one could tell if the shooter could see his victims.

But the width of the tunnel here did not exceed four meters, narrowing further down to barely three. So there was no particular need to see. Just turn the barrel left to right…

Theoretically, it was possible to try to just lie down, the bullets left traces on the wall at about knee height. But it's possible to aim the gun lower…

Running seemed safer. In any case, it's faster. Not faster than a bullet, of course... but crawling, as you hear bullets roaring

ominously overhead — that was too much!

Only six people made it to the lifesaving turn…

Raiders.

None of the sectarians made it.

When people in dusty clothes with hastily wrapped, bloody bandages began to pour out of the dark hole, shouting and swearing, the ringleader was shocked!

“What the fuck happened back there?! Where’s Grishka?!”

“There he is…” pointed a raider.

“Well?!” the ataman jumped up to the head of the group. “What happened over there?”

“I mean... fuck if I know... Some fucking cannon shot us to shit! The walls were shot clean through! The fucking bricks were flying all over the place!”

“What fucking cannon?! What fucking bricks?!” Ivan the Terrible started to freak out.

Someone softly touched Ivan’s shoulder, pulling him aside. The priest squatted in front of the wounded gunman.

“Don’t yell... you’re already here, and nothing will hurt you anymore. Calm down…”

His voice was calm, kind of monotonous and... unexpectedly soft. The raider suddenly relaxed and softened.

“What happened down there? Did you see it with your own eyes?

Tell us…”

“Well... those hooded guys found a wall. It was made of bricks, blocking the tunnel.”

“A solid wall?”

“No. There used to be a door... Probably. And now it has a wooden shield made of green boards. There’s no way through, it’s sealed up. These guys... they started taking apart the wall. They drilled… they listened. I don’t know, we were sitting on the sidelines. And then... Then the bricks flew off the wall! And people were being torn apart! Arms, legs flying... They all died.”

“Did you hear the gunshots?”

“No... I can’t remember. Everybody was screaming... and that fucking echo — down there all you have to do is stomp your foot, and it ricochets off the walls from all sides. Something was rumbling, I guess…”

“Did they shoot right through the wall?”

“Yeah, I saw whole pieces breaking off with my own eyes. There was stuff flying all over the place... some metal, broken bricks. We were hit by shrapnel, many of us!”

“Anybody else survive?”

“I don’t know. We’re the only ones who made it to the corner where the gun didn’t reach. Maybe somebody else is still lying there…”

The militant began shivering violently, and the cultist stopped asking his questions. He nodded, patted the raider on his back in a friendly manner, and returned to the ataman.

“He’s in shock. It’s a good thing he managed to tell me what he did before it hit!”

“So what was that?”

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s hard to say. Going through a brick wall... it’s clearly not an ordinary handheld machine gun! Probably some kind of automatic security system, we’ve seen those before. Although from what we’ve seen, the machine guns are of regular caliber... but there may be exceptions! I’ve never seen anything like it before, but there were rumors…”

“So now what? We wait for the night?”

“Down there it doesn’t make any difference. Day, night... it doesn’t matter.”

“But it can’t have endless ammo!”

“Well, our people aren’t immortal, unfortunately. But that won’t do much good either. These turrets usually blow up when they run out of ammo, there’s a big explosive charge. So the passage will inevitably be closed…”

The ataman snorted.

“So what do you suggest we do? Just play possum?”

“We have to admit, this time he outplayed us. Alas! But this man didn’t come here to sit underground forever, you don’t have to go that far to do that! He could hide in the city in peace, there’s enough room... No, there’s something else... He’ll be out soon! He’ll take what he came for and try to leave. Judging by all these surprises,» the priest nodded at the hole in the passage. “the Predator is not

afraid of traps, which means he has a map of the dungeons. You brought up the contents of the radio warehouse, didn't you?"

Ivan nodded - the haul was not bad indeed! Not too valuable, sure, but... very useful!

"And this is just one tunnel, and not even a whole one! So imagine — what else is down there? Is it worth a few lost lives?"

"Well," Terrible reluctantly admitted, "peoples' lives have value too!"

"The value varies…" the cultist tilted his head. "Varies very much in fact!"

"Maybe… So, what, we wait for him to show up? I'm sure he'll come out somewhere not too far here!"

The ground trembled under their feet, and a cloud of dust came out of the dark hole of the passage.

"The machine exploded…" The priest pursed his lips. "Didn't have that much ammo, did it... Although it's large caliber! Don't need too much. Someone must have survived... moved a little, and it started firing again…"

He turned to the ataman.

"So, what? Are we waiting for the Predator?"

"To hell with you! We are…"

***

After the screams behind the wall stopped, I waited a few more minutes, allowing the survivors to get as far away from this place as possible. There's no doubt that some of them managed to make it

out. Whatever... I've got bigger fish to fry.

I put a flashlight on my forehead and sneak up to my mine rapidly.

It's not a trap anymore, so I upgrade the charge by cutting the cable that's attached to the wooden shield.

After my experiment with the large-caliber machine gun, the wall could be kicked down easily. You can see the holes in it, so there's no need to break the wooden shield.

And so I see no point in the further existence of this trap. I'm willing to bet it wouldn't fool anybody.

I had to get creative with the elongation of the rope... even used some rifle straps from the carbines in the warehouse! In the end it turned into... mm-hmm... quite a «harness» (a rope is not what it was...) that led somewhere around the corner.

I'm not dumb enough to blow up three boxes of hand grenades from ten or twenty meters! So I had to build this... «contraption»... All my gadgets are not designed for such a powerful explosion, I specialize in smaller charges.

Still, it's scary... the explosion might be very serious.

And at the last moment it hits me!

Despite everything, I'm not a real villain... A real one would have realized what to do by now!

I build a small fire made from the leftover planks. A small one, just so it smolders…

I cover a couple of grenades with rags and put them carefully on the planks — the fire should reach them in a couple of minutes. It won't

go out, I didn’t spare oil from the food cans or paper from the empty cartridge packs.

Now, let’s gently pull out the safety pins…

The grenades, even when the rags burn through, will not go anywhere — a pair of nails holds them in place. But I didn’t use anything to hold the levers (except the aforementioned rags)!

The rag will burn though, the levers will be free, and the fuse will get to work.

Four seconds — and bam!

Inspired, I run to the warehouse and bring another box of grenades — I won’t be able to carry so much anyways…

I inspect the entire contraption.

Well... it seems to okay.

A match lights up, and a happy light runs along the paper fuse.

Okay... it’s going now, even the planks got going... I put wood chips in there, too…

Very good!

I gotta get out of here!

Mm-hm-hm... I’m not a great fucking bomb expert…

It’s ringing in my ears, and my mouth has an unpleasant taste — the charge was clearly excessive! Or is it a consequence of an explosion in a closed (well, not quite...) space?

Either way the blast wave caught up with me.

Didn’t go flying into the wall, thank God. And there seemed to be no other fatal consequences. I can walk on my own legs, work with my hands too, it seems… and my mind is still capable of thinking, albeit not that well.

Chapter 15

In short, I didn’t get very far that day.

I moved with caution, keeping in mind that there might be other «smart guys» like myself who have come through here. So — I look under my feet and walk slowly...

I sleep in some inconspicuous room. What used to be here is… fuck if I know... but now there’s only dust and all manner of garbage.

The next day.

I’ve made it about a kilometer or so. According to my preliminary calculations, the tunnel will soon turn towards the shore. It’s impossible to tell where I’m going now. Maybe I’m heading in a totally different direction, impossible to tell, no compass will work down here…

The tunnel has narrowed a little, and now it’s just over one meter wide.

Say what you will, but this is definitely not a transportation system — what would you carry along these small tunnels?

A wall ahead…

It’s not temporary, it’s concrete!

I sit down on the floor and catch my breath.

Well, I did get somewhere…

To the left of the door on the wall there is a familiar unit with a control panel. The place for the flash drive... it’s here!

Well, shall we take our chances?

The panel flashes, and the standard system response starts.

Yeah!

Man, some people have a smart brain! (Those present are no exception...)

Click…

The door squeaks on its hinges.

And there's something new!

The internal control panel has a slightly different look. It's not old, it's just different. Well... here's a good reason to check with Oleg!

But first I need a computer…

You can see that this room was set up carefully, and seriously! It's the same bluish backlight on the floor. Well, I'm not surprised, since the control unit is running... There's electricity, so the ventilation and other stuff should work…

As it turned out, I could tell ventilation is working right away, the air here is different, not like in the tunnels I made it out from.

There was a light switch on the wall, with a characteristic light on the switch, so it's easier to find. As far as I remember, I've not seen anything like it anywhere else in the compound before. But it is common at various Terra Group locations.

I make a mental note and grab my ZIG, dropping into a combat stance. I don't need to meet my former employers here! They'd greet

me warmly… hell, even hotly!

Backpack on the floor, a few grenades slip into my pockets, and I press against the wall, moving carefully.

It turned out to be an observation point, I was able to gather that from the data in the computer. The last time this facility was used was during the evacuation of Terra Group employees, the ones that were gathered in the sanatorium. Meaning my colleagues! I'd be lying if I said I've ever heard anything about facilities like this one…

The instructions for PMC operators was quite specifically stated in the instruction files, which I also found in the computer.

"...set up posts that block the coastal highway and prevent the passage of enemy forces from the direction of the lighthouse and the roadblocks of the Russian Interior Forces. Ensure unobstructed evacuation of all persons from the sanatorium onto the arriving boats. Upon execution of the order disassemble the posts, clearing up traces of your presence if possible and move back to the main base by land...»

Well, judging by the care with which this room was closed up, the USECs accomplished their task. And they left not in a hurry, but in an organized manner. After that nobody else used the bunker, even though all the equipment was in good order.

Including communications — I easily got in touch with Oleg, which made both of us very happy! About twenty minutes were spent on a detailed telling of the story of my escape from the first bunker.

"Everything is still working there, by the way!" the technician gave me the good news. "Seems no one followed in your footsteps…"

"They can try!" I smirk maliciously. "I don't envy anybody in that case!"

“You should block off this tunnel, too,» says my comrade. “You don’t know who else might be wandering along these tunnels!”

“I will,» I nod the image on the screen. “and I’ll block the entrance from the shore, change the password.”

Said and done!

After working some magic on the computer I set up a new code phrase and block the old flash key. Now the door can only be opened with my flash drive.

Tunnel…

I grab a few grenades and a few ordinary table knives from the kitchen — not any worse than regular pegs for setting mines. Even better in fact, they won’t rust as quickly. And a couple of glasses…

Walking away from the door about a hundred meters, I install the first tripwire, a loop above the floor. In another fifty meters two grenades with one fishing line. Touch it, and both will go off, the line is wrapped around the lever, and both pins go to my pocket. Very dangerous setup, actually. You blink and kaput... There’s nowhere to hide from the shards in the narrow passage, and you can’t outrun the blast wave.

The last grenade goes on the visor above the bunker door. The wire leads to a bolt on the inside of the door. You open the door, you receive a present right on your head…

That’s it, time to rest!

Sleepy…

I’m not just tightly wound at this point, I’m more tension than man!

The bunker consists of several rooms.

Immediately behind the vestibule is the duty officer's room. There are embrasures in the walls, through them you can fire into the vestibule itself, as well as part of the corridor. The first terminal of the central computer is also in this room.

The corridor turns left (by the way, that's is also a defensive trick — it is more convenient for those defending to shoot with their right hand from behind the wall) and ten meters later is a dining room/kitchen. After another corner are the barracks with bunk beds. There is also a toilet and a shower.

There's a gun storage area, a food storage area, and a room with a computer. There's another room at the end of the hall, I don't understand its purpose. I hope I will though…

And that's it…

I haven't done an audit of the warehouses yet, I'm sleepy! Everything else can wait for a bit...

Chapter 16

“Uh, sir?”

Mark Forbett raised his head. William Medcraft, the head of the computer team, was on his doorstep. They tended to rarely bother management beyond the weekly reports. And if their boss, throwing aside all conventions and even basic subordination, visits counterintelligence… There has to be a good reason.

“Hello, William! Come in, have a seat…”

The guest nodded and pulled up a chair.

“Sir... I don’t even know where to start…”

“From the top, my friend! That would make the most sense!”

The computer guy coughed.

“Sir... I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but every employee of the Terra Group had a certain... Mm-hmm... let’s call it ID.”

“Please be more specific.”

“It would be difficult for me to explain to you... In short, in some cases we can identify the person currently working on the network. Not his photo, of course... although, in some cases, that’s possible. It’s rather like…”

“Like handwriting? Similar to radio operators? Did I understand you correctly?” the counterintelligence officer tilted his head.

“Well... to a certain extent... You see, there are peculiarities that may mark a particular person... you could say, habits... We have a special

algorithm to calculate and compare, it's called 'Torch.' So we use it and sometimes it can determine who's working at a certain computer."

"And what is the probability of a match?"

"Sir, the algorithm is not yet fully implemented…"

"William... I'm not your research supervisor! I'm interested in other things!"

The specialist took a breath. Well, that's expected, they're citizens! We dressed them in uniforms, even gave them guns, and still, they're as weak as they ever were…

"We've found out quite some time ago that certain people go online from time to time. Those that have been recorded and studied. In general that's not really anything that out of the ordinary, some of the staff is currently working at our sites, so that makes sense... We were alarmed by another thing! One of them went online from a place where they simply couldn't be! Under any circumstances at all!"

The counterintelligence officer sighed. He didn't understand much of this story. Algorithms... they're gonna study psychoprofiles eventually... Sure, in the real world that must be very important and necessary. But here? In this godforsaken hole? There's no time for science!

"Report it to command, let them find out how this could have happened…» Forbett stood up, making it clear that the conversation was over.

"Sir, but this man isn't alive! He's been removed from the database. He's marked as dead!"

Mark freezes.

“Error ruled out?”

“Sir, we’ve studied his profile at almost seventy percent! He was part of a group of programmers who had high clearance on a number of projects. These are the kinds of people we study and control in the first place!”

Counterintelligence officer sat back down.

“So... Who is this man?”

“Karasyov Denis Viktorovich, employee of…”

“I know where he worked. Next!”

The computer guy was a little overwhelmed by the change in his conversation partner, and was a little confused on how to answer. The counter-intelligence officer transformed right in front of his eyes! From a polite and courteous conversationalist, he suddenly became a tough and demanding man. Only now did Medcraft belatedly consider that all the rumors among employees about the counterintelligence unit might may not have been completely baseless…

“He’s accessed the closed technical control network.”

“Did Karasev have access to that?”

“No, sir. He was never connected to this project in any way.”

“Okay. Continue.”

“Flash key number 12AD874 was used to access the network. According to our records this key belonged to... James Foster

Crown, a service officer... from your service, sir!”

“Belonged?” Forbett raised his eyebrow.

“He’s marked ‘missing on duty’ in the database.”

“Why hasn’t the key been removed from the active key database?”

“We can’t do that, sir!” The computer guy suddenly perked up. “Requires mandatory confirmation of the fact and instructions from management. Written, sir!”

“Consider that you have received these instructions and confirmation. Is that enough?”

“No, sir! You must confirm your instruction with the appropriate higher-ranking key. And not just you, sir... there has to be two keys! Otherwise, the system will not allow such a command.”

“Well, who here could have a key like that?”

“Zero-zero level, sir? Just you, sir... No one else has that clearance. Even the base commander has a lower-level code, series zero…”

Mark shot a perplexed look at the person he was talking to.

“So... whoever found Crown’s key... they can use it now?!”

“They can, sir. Unfortunately, we can’t disable or bypass the security setting, the whole system will crash!”

“And what smartass decided that?!”

“The order was sent down from your department, sir... Directly from the Group’s security management, sir! Two years ago!”

Forbett had to use all his will to restrain himself. It wasn't the specialist's fault, the instruction was sent from the top and he had to follow it! It's another matter that there should have been some potential kinks figured out... but again, he's not the one that's responsible for that.

"Okay, William... it's not your fault. Well, tell me…"

And there was quite a bit to tell…

Karasev was recorded by Torch several times. But the issue was that these recordings only marked the attempts by the user to access the systems designated as priority. So only the attempt of the specified person to access a certain address was marked. Tracking the point of entrance into the network was technically impossible. Only in some cases, when a stationary computer with its own identifier was used, was it possible to determine the location.

The counterintelligence officer mentally tipped his hat to the people that built the network, even the disaster did not completely destroy it. It did damage it. But it wasn't fully down. There was no access to the Internet, the external gateways were disabled or even physically destroyed. For the same reason there was no connection to the outside world, even though such attempts were regularly made. But there was a stable enough connection between some objects. And although any attempts to establish a centralized management structure (or even basic interaction) for the disparate USEC groups and various subdivisions of the concern, failed so far, there was still hope.

Most often Karasev's activity was noted in quadrants C7 and H11. At one point he went online from a computer that was located at object B34, marked as "spare car parts warehouse.» All subsequent connections were apparently from other locations, since this identifier was not recorded in his sessions after that.

“We made a request with the maintenance system of the warehouse, there is absolutely no activity that would indicate the presence of any people there. The ventilation system only comes online once a week, which would mean it’s impossible for anyone to be there. They would simply suffocate! All the doors are locked. The last time they were open was a few days after the disaster, when employees from among the local service staff tried to leave the warehouse.”

“Did they leave?” Forbett asked.

“Yes. And they were, uh... liquidated by the turret, which went into combat mode according to instructions from the control center. There’s a photo. Bandits tried to approach the building several times, but had no success…”

‘That’s one way of saying they were shot by the autonomous machine gun!’ the counter-intelligence thought to himself.

“So you mean the warehouse’s empty now?”

“Yes…» the computer whizz answered, with less confidence than before. “At least that’s what the data from the control system shows.”

“Then how did Karasev get in there?”

“Alas…» the specialist shrugged. “I can’t answer that question. I can’t rule out it’s an error, the network isn’t operating as designed.”

“When was that?”

From the records provided by Medcraft, the counterintelligence officer surmised that Vortex went online already after he met with Charles Honer. He really helped them out at that point…

But how is this related to object B34?

Hard to tell... it's far away from the scene of the battle, in a territory formally controlled by Boar's gang. Any verification expedition has a real probability of encountering gangsters. Not like there isn't enough trouble as it is…

"What was the last location he accessed the system from? What kind of object is it?"

"Observation post number two. It's been out of service for a long time, sealed."

As it turns out, the observation post was opened by the missing flash key. The bunker computer, as intended, sent a message and then reported that all life support systems are operational and water consumption was recorded in the shower.

"Three hours later the computer went offline and there is currently no communication with the bunker. Also…"

William placed his tablet on the table.

"It's a picture from the webcam on the main computer. It was set up to automatically take a picture of anyone that tries to turn it on."

Forbett didn't have to think too hard, it wasn't the first time he'd seen that face.

"Okay... Thank you, William, you've been very helpful! From now on report to me on everything related to this man, as soon as you know it! At any time of day and night!"

"Yes, sir! Absolutely, sir!"

When the door closed behind the specialist, the counter-intelligence officer immediately called on the duty officer.

“Reinforced task force going out! Tell the head of the team to come to me!”

Half an hour later he was facing the muscle-bound operator in full combat gear.

“Harry Horst, sir!”

“Sit down, Harry…» Mark turned the computer display around so that Harry could see it clearly. “Observation post number two, you know it?”

“We’ll find it, sir.”

“All right! Leave now. Grab some more ammunition! According to our information it’s a real layer cake out there! Scavs, gangsters, raiders — no one can really tell! And they’re not our friends…”

Horst nodded silently, he knew the lay of the land already.

“According to our maps there are two exits from the bunker, the main one and the reserve one. Both are equipped with security systems and cameras.”

“Sir, but they can be disabled from the outside, we should have a key.”

“That’s true, Harry! But I have a gut feeling that a key might not work... So there’s another option…”

There was a different image on the display.

“There is one more passage, it leads into the old tunnels. There’s no turrets, just a camera. Another issue is that the entrance to the tunnels is quite far away … By the way, there is no protection or access control there at all. At least we didn’t install it there.”

“Sir... But why don’t we know anything about this access point?”

“Because, my friend, some ‘alternatively gifted’ people didn’t add them to the paperwork! And if I hadn’t purposefully dove deep into it, I wouldn’t have known anything! By happy coincidence, Harry, I was the one that gave those idiots a stern talking-to!”

The operator only shook his head.

“Yes, sir... many people could have died because of this…”

“Thank God it’s not going to happen, now that we know! Please, look at this…”

An image appeared on the screen of a person looking right into the camera.

“This man could be in the bunker. We need him! Not necessarily in perfect health, but alive! He must be alive!”

“He doesn’t look like an experienced fighter.”

“This is a mistake, my friend! Denis is his name, he’s a cruel and cold-blooded killer. Experienced and extremely dangerous!”

“Killer, sir, is still not a fighter... not a soldier!”

Forbett looked at his companion with interest.

“Hmm... there’s something about that thought... I won’t argue with you, Harry! But, one way or another, you must take him!”

“Well, then we will…”

Chapter 17

Radio conversation.

“I’d like to hear Senya…”

“Who’s asking?”

“An old friend... Tell him Skinny was looking for him.”

“Call again in two hours, we’ll find him.”

Two hours later.

“Skinny? What the hell do you want…”

“Hi, Senya! We should talk…”

“What the fuck is this about?”

“There’s a conversation. Regarding business, not shitting you!”

“Where?”

“Where we met last time, you remember?”

“The tavern?”

“That’s the one. Before you reach it, there’s house on the left, you know it?”

“Well... I remember something like that…”

“Can you come tonight?”

“That’s a little scary... it’s gonna be dark.”

“It’s a profitable proposition, mind you!”

“Okay... let’s meet.”

The empty apartment building, just a five-story house, was dark. It seemed like the house died a long time ago. Only occasionally the doors, knocked out by the powerful kicks of various looters, slammed with the wind, and some remaining glass was visible in the windows.

Several dark figures sneaked almost silently up to the house, taking up position so that fire from the windows would be as ineffective as they could possibly make it. They took up the position and became as still as stone.

Some time passed, and cautious movement was heard on the approaches to the building — someone was coming. They didn’t just walk up in the middle of the street, but instead sneaked quietly along the walls. A minute or two, and everything went quiet. The people that came up took up position and were not in a hurry to do anything else.

Whistle!

Light and barely audible.

After a few seconds it was repeated.

In response was a different whistle, more like a bird.

A little more time passed, and some movement happened from the direction of the approaching group. A dark shadow slipped towards the left house entrance. Three short knocks were heard. They were made with something metallic on the iron frame of the front door. The door itself was torn from the hinges by a grenade, and had long been

lying on the ground.

There was a small pause, two knocks repeated from the other side, and the shadows on the other side also moved. Three silhouettes, not as carefully disguised as before, moved to the location where the first knocks were heard.

“Senya?”

“Here I am, you old villain…”

The two parties came together, and the guards stayed behind so as not to disturb the conversation of their leaders.

“Well, hello, you devil!”

“And good tides to you!”

“What did you call me for?”

Skinny sank down on the old wardrobe lying next to him (it must have been forgotten during the hasty escape of its owners) and made an inviting gesture, asking Senya to sit down.

Senya wasn’t bothered and settled down next to him.

“How long had we it been since we’ve seen each other? About a year?”

Senya had to think a little.

“No less... You’ve stopped coming to meetings when you started working with the foreigners.”

“Business! You know how it is…”

“I do... Are you still with them?”

“Well, yeah... Where else is there to go? There’s no one from the old guard left!”

“That’s debatable” Senya shook his head. “Boar’s really coming up. Falin too... And the Hood, I won’t say anything, he was always on his own.”

“And who are you with now?”

“We work on the coast... At the sanatorium and nearby… It’s hard there! You probably don’t know anybody!”

“I’ll bet I don’t. Well, I have some work for you, though. And we pay ahead!”

“What’s the job?”

“You need to make some noise.”

“That’s it?”

“We’ll pay five grand.”

Senya thought about it.

“Just make noise? Where?”

“Between the lighthouse and the army checkpoint. You don’t have to shoot anybody, just make noise, shoot a bit, that’s all.”

“Wonderful... And for that you pay five? You’re not telling me everything…”

“Everything is clean, honest! There’s a group going there. But they’re

sly and careful, and won't engage with randos on the way. They'll go around to the side. And that's where we'll meet them. It's as simple as that!"

"How long do we need to make noise?"

"Starting tomorrow and for a couple of days. If any of locals come out, don't fuck with them. We don't need this."

"That's where Timokha Bright hangs out, it's his area. Best not to piss him off…"

"I don't know him. If you have a connection with him, you can explain. If you want, you can even hire him…"

"He'll demand money."

Skinny shrugged.

"As you wish. We pay, the rest is not our concern. We can add an extra thousand, but no more!"

"I see you're sitting pretty!"

"What's the use? Where are you going to spend the money?"

"Tell me about it!"

The two old acquaintances are silent.

"Do you have the money with you?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

"If I get Timokha in on this, you'll give another grand later."

“You’ll find me over the radio. I’ll meet you here, bring everything. You know me, I’m as honest as the day is long!”

***

The bunker was of no particular interest. Just temporary lodging for a small group, a kind of observation post.

A small supply of food and ammunition, a shower room to clean up…

And also, of course, an internet connection!

Even upon my first visit to the dungeons, Oleg and I seriously considered it. Knowing my former employers, I didn’t doubt for a second that the software on the computers contained spyware. The basic management principle for Terra Group is «Everything has to be under control!»

I don’t believe for a second that they’ve deviated from their principles here. There has to be some tricky surveillance system in place. So neither of us thought we could avoid it and prepared accordingly.

Hidden CCTV cameras didn’t seem to be present, unlike inside the former auto parts warehouse, there’s nowhere to put them. There were no complicated ventilation systems or cable ducts. And clichéd thinking, typical for most Western companies, played against them in this case.

“When we pulled cables, we always laid them to a certain point where we connected them to a junction box. And if it was necessary to get the cable further, there was usually a duplicate junction box. From there, we pulled the rest of the cable…” said the technician.

It wasn’t hard to put two and two together.

“And who was responsible for this section of the line?”

“Fuck knows…» my partner shrugs.

It’s not hard to guess that if there’s a component in a system, the maintenance of which is in the hands of some unknown persons, one should think hard and figure out whose interests are served by the existence of this component? And where are they located?

Rooms of the duty officers, valuable storage warehouses, and all possible entrances and exits — that’s exactly where I expected to find them. And that’s where I did.

After that everything is simple... I wasn’t planning on hanging out in front of them waving tools. I don’t need that much popularity and recognition…

The guess was right on the money, when I opened the boxes I found video cameras.

And now all of them are closely looking at a static picture — an empty corridor or warehouse. For that, each camera’s view is carefully reproduced and set up in front of them. That’s simple enough…

Just taking a picture and printing it out on a printer is easy enough. Especially since these cameras weren’t really that high quality… And a couple of them were even ruined. No, they were transmitting something, of course... but it was very difficult to make out anything on the images it produced... almost impossible.

What, did someone naively think that we were sleeping all day every day or something? Yeah, right, we know the kinds of guys that sleep too long and what happens to them…

Obviously, we didn’t find all the traps and tricks. But at least we found some…

And besides... am I a programmer or what? Click-clacking on the keyboard and clicking the mouse button is more familiar to me than shooting a gun. I'm a real expert in that area! And battling me on my turf isn't easy…

Meeting equals in my craft before everything went to shit was rare enough... And now, I think there's even fewer of us.

I took a good look around the area. There were no specially arranged places to put cameras. Well, except for the built-in webcams above the computer screens, I think these can be found almost everywhere. Even at serious locations they had these crappy ones… Purchasing was standardized!

I pack an emergency pack, so to speak. Well... not really a pack... I would probably call it a backpack…

Food, ammunition, some supplies, there's still plenty in the warehouse.

So I hide some of those in the surrounding woods and hills. Again, it's simple to do and very useful!

I placed some things in a backpack (there's plenty of them in the warehouse), and dragged it as far as made sense. There, I dug a hole and hid it… for the time being.

I have to do that with great care, somebody on the shore was making a fuss. It's not clear who is fighting whom. It's not really a battle, just some random shots.

What else would you call it?

From time to time there are a few shots fired, and then there's silence. It doesn't sound like a serious fight (or even a fight at all). I

can’t imagine that some dumbasses are being repeatedly ambushed by someone sitting quietly in one place, even with my inexperience.

Why do I think that someone is sitting in one place?

The bunker camera watches a piece of the coast. Honestly, there’s nothing to look at, the approach to the water is blocked by a long fence. Somewhere behind it they’re shooting... And the shots are coming from one location, that’s easy to make out. And pray tell me, where are the opponents coming from? From another dungeon or something?

Actually, no, please, don’t tell me, I’m not interested in finding out. It’s better not to get close at all!

And when I get back to the bunker, I don’t sit idly, there’s enough work to do.

When will I finally get a good night’s sleep?

***

“Tell me, William…» The counter-intelligence officer took his eyes off the report. “How does it even happen that unauthorized persons get access to passwords and keys to such sensitive objects? Your report explained quite a lot, but I’d like to hear it in a more... let’s say, simple form. Don’t forget, I’m not an expert on complex algorithms. It’s your specialty, so you’re in charge!”

If this flattered the senior computer specialist, he did not show it. The counterintelligence officer in front of him was the wrong person to show one’s emotions to so openly…

“Sir, it’s fairly simple. Karasev, as far as I can tell from the documents you procured, used to work as a manager and administrator of our networks. I looked through the reports, he was highly praised by our

specialists! No doubt this guy had a brilliant future. Analytical intelligence, an ability to quickly find innovative solutions... he had it all! But," Medcraft paused, "there was one thing the reports missed…"

Forbett raised his eyebrow.

"What did we fuck up, to put it bluntly?"

The specialist clicked the mouse and a picture appeared on the monitor screen.

"This man is better known by his alias, Drill. A talented hacker, no consistent allegiance, but, nevertheless, a high-grade specialist in security system hacking, among other things... Extremely proud and demanding of his work."

"Drill?" The counterintelligence scout frowned. "I've heard that name before…"

"He has been repeatedly approached to cooperate. Alas... he was an extremely unstable man. A junkie! And you know the company policy on such people…"

Mark nodded. Of course he knew! His branch sometimes carried out missions, eliminating these... «random passengers.» Another matter altogether is that sometimes they became drug addicts with Forbett's colleagues' help... but the ends justify the means!

"So…" the computer specialist continued. "We managed to establish that Karasev and Mikhail Dronov…"

"Who?"

"Drill was the alias of Mikhail Dronov…"

“Oh, I see. Keep going.”

“They knew each other. They even worked together on a number of projects! That is, until Dronov got hooked on drugs. Officially, they stopped working. But there’s reason to believe that they just stopped stating their relationship and started working together in secret.”

“Well, okay. What does that mean?” The counterintelligence officer looked at the screen.

“Remember codename Nevermore? There was a massive intrusion into the company’s control network at the time. I think your service initiated the investigation? There’s reason to believe that a lot of confidential information was stolen from our servers in the attack. And Dronov fell under suspicion, for good reason! It had his handwriting all over it! And in this light,» Medcraft emphasized, «a possible team of Karasev and Dronov is an ominous proposition…”

Forbett was thinking. He thought for a while, then looked up at the specialist.

“You think Karasev might have been a mole? Someone sent into our operation with that purpose?”

“I can’t rule out that possibility. We’ve analyzed the data currently available, and traces of Drill’s style are visible in some cases…”

“What do you mean? Is he wandering in our network right now too?”

“Sir, it’s fairly hard to explain… but in a way, yes, he is. His manner of operation has been studied well by us. And Karasev seems to be the person implementing the work of his comrade.”

“But we can change passwords and access codes!”

“No, sir. We can’t. Not from here at least. Our level of access isn’t

high enough for that. Such a command can only be sent from the control center in Antwerp, but we haven't been in contact with them for a long time."

"So, if I understand you correctly, this smart ass can continue to hack our facilities with impunity?"

"If he has the right keys, yes, he can."

"Well,» Forbett smiled, «how many keys could he have? One or two?"

"Sir, a key was used to enter object B34 that didn't exist at all. In other words, this particular key wasn't issued to anyone and wasn't registered in the system."

"But did it open the doors?"

"Yes, because all the required codes were applied. The program allows this, as a last resort. Like in this situation... Alas, when creating the management and control systems we did not take into account the possibility that these events could last for so long."

"So, the key was made now?» Mark frowned.

"Apparently yes, sir. Using our standard software and the appropriate interface."

"William... you're scaring me! This could mean somebody might come in here too, right?"

"Maybe, sir…"

Chapter 18

“Croak! Look!” Dressed in a dirty cotton wool coat and hat, a man pushed his sleeping comrade.
“Wha?!” The other guy was startled awake.

“You idiot! Don’t yell! Look over there!”

The Scav that had fallen asleep stirred awake and looked in the direction his buddy was pointing.

Along the ravine walked a chain of people, slowly and quietly. Dressed in camouflage and bulletproof vests, with weapons ready. Helmets, tricked-out sights, imported assault rifles... serious guys!

“USECs, the fuckers.”

“Uh-huh... we gotta wake the boys up, the two of us can’t do shit here! If they see us, we’re dead.”

“Got it!” The tramp hastily got ready to leave. “I’ll be back soon!”

He didn’t have to run far, a bunch of tramps were sleeping in a hole nearby. A tree had fallen and brought up a pretty big chunk of land. The Scavs covered the pit with branches and other junk and built a temporary shelter. They could rest there without being afraid they’d draw unnecessary attention to themselves. They could even hide what they found, a random person wouldn’t immediately find this hole! Even if they knew where it was…

There were about ten people. A strong smell of booze was in the air — before going to bed they drank the vodka they found in one of the abandoned houses. It wasn’t a lot, just three bottles, but this was a gift from above for the team!

“Guys!” The messenger put his head through the entrance to the pit. “Wake up! Quickly! USECs walking in the ravine!”

“Towards us?!” Alarmed, one of the tramps raised his head.

“Nope... passing by somewhere... They’re fully decked out! We weren’t seen, we kept quiet. I left Fedya to get you guys!”

The Scavs were on the move. A machine gun even appeared from somewhere, and its owner immediately left the pit, brandishing the gun. Sure, there weren’t many bullets, only half a ribbon... but that didn’t bother anyone.

It couldn’t be said that everyone in attendance were idiots, seriously expecting to win the upcoming battle. No, they weren’t that dumb, the situation was different.

This area was of no particular interest. The forest, the hills... and no buildings. The abandoned cottages have long been looted.

It’s a transit zone by the road.

But that was the reason nobody bothered to hold it yet. It was not difficult at all to take over it, but what to do with it next? What to survive on? Robbing whom?

This place, if necessary, could easily be bypassed, there were obstacles. If it’s difficult to walk this route, it’s easy to find another one. And small skirmishes... that’s common.

And for this reason, all shootouts went the same way.

People got together, shot at each other, and ran away.

Each in their own direction.

But the ones that were ultimately left to lie at the site of the recent skirmish were usually searched by this team of Scavs. They weren't really a gang, not bold enough, or energetic enough.

But shooting passer-bys was exactly their speed! Using their knowledge of the area, the team scattered and hid behind bushes and in shelters. Once the opponents left, they crawled out of their shelters and quickly looted the corpses.

Yes, sometimes there were issues, losses among the team were common. But the stuff they picked up from the dead bodies made up for everything many times over. Because for a group running from shots in their direction, searching for and inspecting the bodies of the lost is not a priority.

"Will they go to the bridge?" One of the Scavs asked as he ran.

"Looks like it...» said the messenger. "Usually everybody goes in that direction through that ravine. It's a quiet place, no one can see into it from the sides."

These vultures were smart enough not to attack people as they walked along the secluded roads as soon as they were seen. This happens once or twice, and people would understand what was happening and change their routes…

It was easier to wait for people to get out in the open, and then…

Sooner or later any secret path leads to a relatively open space, where there's a great opportunity to attack!

Taking advantage of the knowledge of the terrain, the vultures quickly overtook the USECs, who had a rough time walking along the marshy ravine. It was quite possible to walk along it... but you just couldn't go fast.

Upon arriving at the site of the ambush, the Scavs immediately dispersed behind the bushes and into the pits. They never ambushed the same place twice, which however did not prevent them from choosing convenient positions for shooting. The tramps had studied this place for several months already, looked for and sometimes built firing points and caches. Well, not really caches... a pit covered with branches. Sometimes they were even covered with dirt, and usually that was enough. No one was really looking for them. Sometimes these caches were right next to the firing points.

The usual messiness was present, of course. Cursing and shouting, the tramps finally made it to their positions and laid quietly. The usual job, hit the group with fire, quickly retreat from the return fire and then loot the dead bodies later. And to prevent the enemy from hanging around the spot, another group of Scavs had to open fire from far away, forcing the survivors to retreat from the area. Therefore, this group was armed with old bolt-action rifles, this weapon was effective at large distances, and another couple hundred meters made little difference.

The Scavs had plenty of experience in battling more experienced and better-armed enemies and had gotten pretty good at it.

Shots were usually fired at the extremities. The legs, to be specific. No armor on them usually. And getting shot in the leg, even with buckshot… it’s not nice! Walking is hard then too. If they wanted to drag a wounded person, his comrades would be forced to throw away some of their equipment, and the tramps needed exactly that!

They didn’t have the goal of exterminating all opponents. It’s enough if they drop some useful goodies as they retreat. Everything from canned food to weapons.

The old saying «There’s nothing that can’t be sold for a bottle,” is still true.

It’s been 30 minutes.

No movement, no sounds, nothing, the Scavs have learned the hard way that they can’t make any noise! It’ll be safer…

And then... Some movement on the right flank.

How the head of the team made it out of the ravine was not clear. At least, the tramp that was watching the ravine could not explain it.

But the scout only made himself seen at the exit to the open space. How he managed to remain unnoticed for so long, god only knows…

But now he was lying on his stomach and looking at the road in front of him.

The road... well, that’s too fancy a title... A path is more accurate.

It started near the exit from the ravine, and here it became more obvious, widening a bit. It stretched along an open area for about fifty meters, then turned again and got lost in the thick bushes.

One minute... another minute…

The scout didn’t give any signal, so he had to have used a radio. And from nowhere, merging with the surrounding vegetation, several dark figures appeared in the bushes. They moved making almost no noise.

They reached the point where the trail exits from behind the bushes, and a machine gunner took up position. Next to him a second person laid down, sticking out the thin barrel of an assault rifle.

Strange…

Very unlike a regular group of raiders! They look even less like

gangsters. Even BEARs and USECs usually behaved a little differently. They didn't just venture out, like bandits or Scavs. They exercised reasonable caution, checked the route... even sent out scouts!

It didn't really help them, though… but in this case everything was somehow going wrong!

And these guys... it's like they're going deep into enemy territory! Acting like there's a whole bunch of evil scoundrels all around, tracking them.

Some of the tramps, especially the ones who weren't sitting in the pits and caches, and had the opportunity to see it everything with their own eyes, became somewhat... uncomfortable…

However, no one was planning to cancel the plan. Today you miss these guys, tomorrow someone else is gonna walk by for free... and what will they eat? What are they gonna sell to the traders?

The machine gun fired and the USECs almost immediately fell to the ground.

Almost, but not immediately! Not everyone had time to react!

The chain was hit by machine-gun fire!

It was quite effective, two guys in the rear were hit very seriously.

Then there were erratic shotgun shots. The shooters, barely peeking from their positions, fired off their shotguns in the direction of the ground, so that buckshot would hit the people lying on the ground. There was little probability of a fatal hit, but wounds to the limbs were almost guaranteed. The heel, even the palm of the hand, would still get the job done!

Shots were fired from the side under attack, there was the low cough of grenade launchers. And it must be said that the shots turned out to be quite accurate, the Scav's machine gun fell silent and did not take part in the battle after that.

But, nevertheless, the Scavs completed their main task — pinned the USECs down in an almost open place. The Scavs shot from their hideouts and caches, peeking out just to press the trigger. They barely aimed, and there was no great need to aim in this case, the flying buckshot found its target in most cases. Occasionally the other shooters would hit, too. And from the very start the defendants already had wounded (including some quite seriously), and one person killed. Meanwhile, the Scavs only lost a machine-gunner, and he wasn't even killed, only wounded. A couple had small scratches, but nothing serious. Mostly grenade fragments — the Scavs had no defence against such weapons. Ammunition fired from the grenade launchers under the assault rifle barrels sometime exploded above the ground, sprinkling sharp metal shards on the hidden ambush forces.

And yet, the Scavs were too erratic... the piece they bit off clearly was more than they could chew.

The grenade launchers coughed again, this time in unison, followed by bursts of fire, pinning the attackers to the ground... And under cover of fire, fast-moving figures rushed forward. After making it across the open space, they ran into the forest. Several shots went off and fire from that direction weakened immediately. The shooters were killed right in their caches, where they hoped to hide from the enemy bullets. They simply could not predict the sudden, almost suicidal rush by the USECs. And they, upon arriving in the rear of the Scavs, immediately split up in pairs. They moved along the line of the firing Scavs, «twisting» it. They more or less understood where the fire was coming from, none of the attackers were firing from far away.

That is, yet…

To the bolt-action rifle team, people sticking to the ground were not clearly visible. Two hundred meters! You can't even properly make out a standing target!

But figures moving, fully standing — those they could make out. Yes, not all of them. But it was a target! And scattered shots were fired from the hill…

***

"Who the hell is this now?" Harry Horst winced with pain as he bandaged up his right hand.

"Who can tell?" His assistant shrugged. "Scavs... they all look the same. Scattered like rats…"

"Losses?"

"Ours, cap? Three dead, Max Geiner managed to get killed, too! Six men injured, two badly."

Horst swore.

Big guy Max, a «goddamn tank,» as his comrades called him, came out unharmed from many altercations! Being shot in an ambush by some alcoholics? Not a death to be proud of…

"What about them?"

"We've found about a dozen of them. They're just chumps. Shotguns, sawed-offs… a couple assault rifles and carbines... The ones that fired at us with old bolt-action rifles made it out in time, we didn't catch anybody when we reached their location."

The head of the group looked around.

The losses were serious, but his men still had the capability to fight. Except the wounded... that was bad!

They couldn’t leave them here. It’s stupid to carry them to the mission point. If they go back, the mission would not be completed.

“Okay…” He stood up as he winced. “We’re evacuating the wounded to point F22. Leave two men with them and call for an evacuation team to take them back to base. How many combat-ready men do we have left?”

The assistant thought for a moment.

“We’ll leave Delaney and Vonsovsky with the guys... Nine people, including you, cap.”

“That’s enough! There’s just one person in the bunker, according to our eggheads, we can do this!”

Chapter 19

Oh man, I really am greedy... That's a heavy backpack! And it's all my «inner hamster!» It keeps saying "How can you leave someone else's valuables behind?! You can steal them, so why didn't you?"

But as you walk with a heavy sack on your shoulders, you start looking at the world in a very different way… your outlook is burdened…

No, greed is bad!

But c'mon, you can't throw away batteries, that's for sure. And other useful computer gadgets, Oleg almost jumped through the monitor, he was so excited, how could I leave them behind?

There's another issue too, how am I to survive without food?

That and that, and some of this… and now the heavy backpack is mercilessly pushing on my shoulders. Plus, there's armor, weapons, and ammunition…

How am I supposed to walk with all this?

But there's nothing to do... So I go.

Mostly in the dark. I take advantage of my strength, the fact I have the appropriate useful devices. The night sight I found in the bunker, as it turned out, also had a thermal imaging camera. So I can now detect all kinds of living beings (including extremely hostile ones) from a fairly long distance. I can detect them and bypass them carefully. I am not itching for another fucking fight right now.

My work is coming to an end…

The entire bunker is almost fully gutted, I took all the useful stuff and either hid it or took it. I can't tell whether my visit here went unnoticed. Sooner or later uninvited guests might knock on the bunker door.

So I'm alert!

There's too much stuff to carry.

***

"Delta 2 to Arrow."

"Arrow here."

"We're in position. Ready to proceed with the mission. We've locked down both entrances to the bunker and are in control."

"Passage through the tunnel?"

"Two operators are headed there. We estimate ETA of 30 minutes."

"Delta 2, stand by for instructions. Keep in touch at all times."

"Roger that, Arrow."

***

"Sir!" An on-duty officer appears in the doorway. "We've got team Delta 2 on the line. They're in position, ready to proceed with the mission."

"All right!" Forbett raised his head from the tablet. "Get Medcraft here!"

"Yes, sir!"

A few minutes later the excited specialist appeared on the doorstep.

“Sir?”

“Can we get in touch with Observation Post Number Two?”

“Of course!” The visitor seemed somewhat offended by the assumption that he might be unable to do that. “Of course, sir!”

“Can you do it from here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get on with it!”

The visitor pulled his laptop out of his bag and set up at the table.

A few minutes pass…

“The connection’s established. Who do want me to call for?”

“Someone to come to the computer. He’ll hear the call, right?”

“If the computer is on, he’ll hear it.”

“Can’t you check if it is from here?”

William took a breath.

“On your orders, sir, we have made no attempt to remotely control the bunker so as not to alert Karasev with our actions.”

“Yes,» the counterintelligence officer nodded. “I remember. But now that’s not so relevant anymore, the bunker is surrounded and he’s not going anywhere. We can turn off the power supply to all systems,

including ventilation, right?”

“We can, sir.”

“Okay, fine. Let’s get started.”

One minute passes... another one…

“There’s a response, sir!”

Forbett saw that himself, there was movement on the laptop screen.

“Who’s knocking on my door? Can’t you see, no one’s home!” yelled the speakers.

Mark raised his eyebrow in surprise.

“It’s Karasev, sir!” Medcraft quickly explained. “We analyzed the data, he usually responded like that if he was called on earlier than he should have been. There’s a corresponding record in the archives. The voice is very similar.”

“And what should I respond in that case?”

“He spoke... the rest is up to you, sir…”

The counterintelligence officer pulled the laptop towards himself.

“Hello, Denis! Can you hear me?”

The screen blinked and then went dark for a while. Forbett turned to the computer expert, but he only shrugged, as if to say that that’s on the other side... what’s can I do?

The screen lit back up, though it still didn’t display anything.

“I hear you…” sounded off the speakers. “And who are you?”

“Mark Forbett, Group Security. Do I need to explain anything else?”

Suddenly an image appeared on the screen.

You could make out a table with some plates, a chair, and a wall in the background. The image fluttered again, seems the man at the other end of the wire was turning the camera around.

The screen showed the man Forbett was talking to. A relatively young guy, with his hair ruffled. It was clear that he had only recently woken up, there were telltale wrinkles on his face, common for people just out of bed.

“No,» Karasev shook his head. “I don’t need you to explain anything. I know your duties quite well. As well as your operational methods…”

“Business, my friend!” Mark parted his hands. “It’s nothing personal, don’t you know?”

“Well, what do you want from me?”

“We’re interested in the Predator.”

“Everybody’s interested in the Predator,» the man shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind learning more about him myself.”

“You work with him though, don’t you?”

“Are you saying that you’re personally acquainted with the Chairman of the Group’s Board of Directors? He is your direct supervisor!”

“One-zero!” nodded the counterintelligence officer. “But, you must agree, Tarkov is not a big enough city to hide in for a long time without being noticed by anyone.”

“And yet he’s hiding, isn’t he? He started doing it years ago.”

“I think it’s time the mask comes off…”

“I’ll pass on your opinion.”

“I’m afraid,» Forbett shook his head, «that you don’t understand me... The bunker is surrounded by my men, the doors are rigged to blow. Do you need me to explain the consequences of such explosions to you?”

“I’ll be deaf for a while. Then it’ll pass…”

“I’m afraid, my friend, you won’t have the time. To recover on your own, I mean. You will have, let’s call it, help. And it’s not my fault that some procedures may seem a little, uh, inhumane…”

“Are they gonna punch me in the face?”

“Maybe they will…”

“Aren’t you afraid of the response?”

The counterintelligence officer smiled.

“With all due respect, Denis... There’s around ten professionals out there who know their business. They’re out of your league, believe me.”

“And what do you want from me?”

“Not to put on an unnecessary show, with shooting and other special effects. We still need that bunker. In that case my men will escort you here, where we’ll talk... in a normal, constructive environment. Open the door yourself.”

“I need to think about it.”

“Five minutes, my friend. After that, if you don’t answer, my men will start the assault.”

The screen blinked again and went out.

“It’s offline, sir…”

“That’s okay,» Forbett grinned. “He’s a clever man, and I hope he understands what course of action is to his own benefit... It’s one thing to battle tramps and other scoundrels, and another altogether to take on a team of professional soldiers!”

It’s been five minutes, the screen never lit up. The counterintelligence officer shrugged.

“Let’s give him some more time…”

Five more minutes pass.

“This is the duty officer! Delta 2 can start!”

“Yes, sir!”

Medcraft glances over at his laptop.

“Leave it, William. Now the boys will enter the bunker and get back to us.”

The computer expert nodded quietly and made himself comfortable in his chair.

Five more minutes... ten more…

“Sir, report from Delta 2.”

“What’s happening?”

“Couldn’t open the door, had to blow it up.”

“We assumed that from the start,» Forbett shrugged.

“The bunker was booby-trapped, one of our employees died. Didn’t see a grenade…”

“What’s Horst’s situation?”

“No connection, sir, they’re down in the tunnels. The iron concrete is shielding the radio waves, sir…”

“I know! Call him constantly!”

But that wasn’t necessary, the screen turned on. This time the image was different, no plates or cups.

“Harry, is that you?”

“Yes, sir...» He was unrecognizable, with a fresh scar on his cheek.

“What’s wrong with you, mate?! Are you hurt?”

“Yes, sir... I’m afraid we’re going to have to send in an evacuation team... We’re all hurt! Everyone that’s still alive…”

According to the head of the assault team, it seemed too smooth at first. They quickly found the door, disabled the security system (it never fired at them). The door didn’t open, so they had to set up charges.

The first person that dared enter the open door didn’t make it a

dozen meters, a grenade fell down from somewhere above him. By strange coincidence it exploded in mid-air!

The wounded man didn't live ten more minutes…

"We defused several more traps, and two other guys were injured to varying degrees. There were no traps on the reserve exit. It looks like this guy never found it…"

Not surprisingly, since the door was hidden behind a wall cupboard. Just in case…

It was through that door that they eventually entered.

But the group sent into the tunnel never came back. The operator that went to look for them hit a fresh blockage, one that could not be excavated, even by two people!

So they went in the same direction from the bunker side…

And almost immediately they came across a blockage on this side too! At least ten or fifteen meters! Any attempt to dig it up led to dangerous cracking sounds coming from the damaged ceiling.

"We never got a chance to get them out, sir…"

"That's sad, Harry…" The counterintelligence officer pursed his lips. "And this... Karasev? Where is he? I want to see his face!"

"He wasn't in the bunker, sir... There was no one there at all…"

"Okay…" Forbett rubbed his chin with force. "Details!"

"The bunker is empty, sir. It has been for at least two days, we found leftover food on the table. It's already dried up. Whoever this person was, he left here a long time before we arrived. The supplies that

should have been here were almost completely looted. There are signs of various equipment, probably dismantled."

"So, what, he just came there to rob the place?!"

"If there were any other goals, we still can't figure out what they were. Not much data for analysis, sir…"

"Roger that, Harry... Get in touch with the on-duty officer, you'll get the help you need."

"Yes, sir…"

Mark turned to the computer guy.

"How do you explain that?"

He just shrugged.

"Most likely, sir, the call was diverted somewhere else... we were just being screwed with!"

"And you couldn't figure that out?!"

"No one could have, sir! When you call a man on his cell phone, you don't have to enter the exact coordinates of the other user, do you? It's not a mobile network, of course... but we're not dealing with an ordinary user!"

***

Man, why did this foreigner call me this early? Normal people sleep at this time! I had to jump up, pick up a laptop and, closing the camera with my hand, quickly run to the far corner. Who the fuck knows this guy... what if he can identify the room in some way I won't know? That's why I set up in a way that makes sure he doesn't see

anything but a table and a bare wall.

Forbett…

I've never met him in person, of course. But I've heard a lot of things about him, and he is an extremely harsh man. And smart, you can't trick him without trying! In fact, the security service of the company are not the kinds of people you can joke with. A real pack of wolves…

I barely made it to my bunk when I got to my room. I couldn't stand up on my own two feet at all! After giving the backpack to the technician, I really wanted one thing — to go to sleep and let him sort it out himself…

Although we know what happens to sleepers…

Fine!

A snack then! Coffee, double dose! And think about what's going on…

I knew that the USECs might notice the bunker. That's why I was in such a hurry to remove everything that might be of any interest. Throw a backpack into a hole, cover it with branches, make a mark nearby, and go! While I was sitting in the bunker I dug into the computers, reconfiguring them in a way that would confuse my opponents.

It was already starting to feel like they were lighting a fire under my ass, I could feel it with all my senses! I don't believe in Terra Group guys being sloppy, they're professionals! Like I was…

Although, why "was"?

I don't seem to have lost all my skills…

Oleg helps too, he’s not a sucker in this field either.

After booby-trapping all the passages, I leave.

It’s night…

Nobody usually wanders around here at this time. It’s awfully dangerous…

I’ll use that to my advantage! I’m not really scared of the dark, I got some clever gadgets…

And yet, I barely made it. It was already starting to get light when I made it to our main shelter.

Some might think I’m an idiot, since I didn’t turn on the bunker defense systems.

Well, it might have helped... for a while. The power could be disconnected remotely, and what happens when the batteries run out? If the unit wasn’t activated in combat mode, nothing.
And if it was…

An explosion above the head has never been good for anyone’s health. And if the guys in the company will notice, they’ll reconfigure these things! Then what will happen?

I don’t know.

Nobody knows what they’re gonna do.

So, we’ll live without any unnecessary experiments. Let them think I got the key to the bunker by accident. Gunning down two or three private military guys isn’t gonna make much difference. But it might show my hand to the specialists looking to catch me... So, no

tricks…

Chapter 20

It took all day to sort out the trophies I brought in. Even more, actually... Much of this time I simply slept, only sometimes being jerked awake by the rapturous shouts of Oleg, who had dug up another toy.

Once he calmed down, he regained his usual confidence and ability to analyze the situation thoughtfully. More than once he had totally stumped me with his ideas and hints.

Man, how little a man needs for happiness!

Food, warmth, and a roof over his head, and he is already calm. Add to that some reliable walls, a steel door, and a man becomes capable of creative thinking.

And when there’s an autonomous machine gun on the roof, he can find the long-forgotten feeling of confidence in the future.

A consultant in that state of mind is very useful to me. The technician has worked for a long time on company objects, and this time was not for nothing. He saw a lot of things, and had been in a variety of places. Only from him did I learn that Terra group was stubbornly focused only on a narrow research field. No, they certainly achieved a lot in that respect.

But, as it turned out, the company was diversified. Extensive warehouses had been built up with the latest technology. A decent amount of awesome goods was immediately delivered, from scientific equipment to food rations. Tools, weapons, and ammunition go without saying.

All this had to be bought, delivered, sorted… Not an easy task!

But they did it! And they did it so cleverly that nobody knew much about it. For example, although I knew about a lot of projects as part of my work, I just heard about this one now…

The visit to the dungeons has cleared up a lot of things. I was busy running around and shooting at people, so I didn't have enough time for thoughtful analysis, but no one interfered with the technician. And all this information fell into the hands of a person who had done something similar before, and was aware of some important details.

"It seems," says Oleg, quickly gulping up his food, "that they were preparing for some shit hitting the fan. Otherwise it's impossible to understand why they needed such substantial stocks. I can understand the fuel and spare parts, they are always needed. In peacetime, in wartime. Medicine too. But this much food and ammunition?"

According to his preliminary calculations, at least two dozen large-tonnage ships passed through the port of Tarkov and unloaded these things here. And that's only in one year!

And only the ships.

There's also the railway... some stuff came into town on it, too.

Here I can add something. As far as I know, most on-road vehicle transport was between the city and the surrounding villages. From the railway station, the cargo went to the warehouses. But never in the opposite direction.

I still remember the lively correspondence with the transport department of Terra Group regarding the needed reduction of idle running of vehicles when transporting goods by rail. Which means that from the station the car left loaded, but when it went in the opposite direction, it was empty for some reason... The accounting department was not happy, no one wanted to pay for transporting air.

This didn’t lead to anything, the brave calculator and pen warriors were ordered to stand down.

But I remembered the reason for the correspondence...

***

“All right, tramps!” Murky coughed. “I’ve got a task for you…”

The morning crowd met the words of their leader with approving grumbling and cheerful shouts. For some time, his reputation has been trending upwards, and several loners had joined the newly formed gang.

“All right!” the ringleader spread his shoulders. “There’s an order for us…”

The assignment he received over the radio was brief. Find the hiding place at the address indicated and act according to the instructions.

In the stash was... an ordinary tablet.

The password was transmitted over the radio, and one of the tramps that had not completely lost his skills was able to power on the tablet.

After that, together with the ringleader, they spent a couple of days going through the contents of the device.

The instructions were very specific.

“Get to a specific location» usually had a photo attached. Usually more than one.

«Find a specific thing in the specified place (with a photo too).”

Usually it was a backpack or a big army type bag.

«Don’t open the bags, deliver what you find to this address.»

Most of the cargo went straight to Khokhol. Some to Prapor. Some items were ordered to be delivered to Murky’s base and that was to be reported over the radio. Additional instructions would be given on this.

Nothing was said regarding the payment, but the ataman had not yet been embarrassed.

Which couldn’t be said for most of the newcomers, there was a murmur in their ranks.

And it didn’t go unnoticed.

“Everybody, quiet! Don’t fuck around!” the ringleader raised his hand. “I see some of you have questions?”

“No one’s been hired to work for free!” objected someone from the crowd.

“I see... Who else wants to speak up?”

There were a few more grunts, who expressed themselves more cautiously.

“That’s it? Or does someone else want to say something?”

No one else spoke up.

“I’ll explain it to everyone! Once…” Murky smirked with a bad look in his eye. “So no one could say they didn’t know…”

The crowd is quiet. The old-timers laughed quietly, the new guys

were about to be set back!

“We don’t work for some nobody, we’re working for the Predator! Are there any smart-asses who haven’t heard about that name?”

There was a light murmur in the crowd.

“This dude is cool and tough! And he doesn’t just talk out of his ass! Is there anyone here who can say otherwise? And stand responsible for your words?”

It goes quiet.

“That’s what I thought... He hasn’t let us down with payment once! If somebody doesn’t know, we had our issues with him at first... But we got to know each other and came to an agreement. He recognized us. He recognized us as equals, not some lackeys! Gavrish, one should think, is known to everyone... right?”

“Yes... We heard... Serious boss…” several voices answered at once.

“Well, Gavrish treats Predator’s man with real respect! And the merchants also act respectfully. With him, just a mediator! But!” The ringleader raised his finger. “He’s never talked with anyone directly like he’s talking with us! I’m in touch with him directly. And he always pays! Generously!”

“Have you ever seen him yourself?” asked a rookie.

“No. And I’m not in any hurry. Nor do I suggest anyone else tries. Anyone that sees his face won’t live to see the morning…”

“Why do you say until morning?”

“Because he most often comes at night... The darkness is his

kingdom, and he's its ruler…"

"Master of the night?" someone sniggered.

"Yeah, sure, why not? He gives orders, pays well, made our case when needed... what else do you want?"

"Well, yeah…" the man didn't give up. "One thing is giving orders... it's not him that's gonna die in that case."

"You could die right here,» Murky started to get angry. "From the windows over there comes a shot and you can only be dragged away... this happened to us before!"

The newcomer, feeling that the conversation was going in an undesirable direction, quit chattering and stepped back.

"Who else has questions?" The ringleader examined the crowd. "No? Then, you, you, and you, half an hour to prepare! Get your boys ready, you're leaving in the evening!"

Well, they didn't make it out in the evening... they were getting ready. The first group only left the next evening. The message specifically stated that it was better to move at night, and not along the roads. Even an approximate route was given.

The groups left, and the camp froze, waiting.

A day, the second, the third…

The first ones didn't come back until the fourth day.

They found two backpacks in the specified places, and took these goods to Khokhol. The guy, not at all surprised, generously gave the guys AKs and ammunition. Quite a bit, actually…

This led the camp to immediately start a joyful party, which only ended in the morning because the moonshine ran out…

In the meantime, the second group arrived, and also brought a backpack and two large sacks. This was not brought to a trader, in accordance with the specific instructions. They made it to the location, and from there a messenger ran back quickly.

Dimon got in touch and asked for instructions.

He didn't wait long, and soon someone's voice spoke in the speakers.

"Take the bag that is marked with a cross to your camp, it's your fee. Leave everything else in apartment number eight, building six on Leaf Alley. The door will be unlocked. Put the cargo down and get out quickly!"

Is it worth mentioning that the bag made it to its target location at an impressive speed?

Lightning struck, and…

Six American rifles with five magazines each. Fifty cardboard cartridge packs. Two dozen grenades, imported it seems... Whatever, they're gonna blow in any case! And six pistols with ammunition and spare magazines.

It's a nice gift... a very nice gift!

The group could now finally be fully equipped, and that was good timing! There's been some issues with guns lately... not all newcomers could boast a serious weapon. Sawed-offs, a couple of smaller ones… Not really good equipment. I mean they're good enough to shoot from behind a corner in a hallway. But shooting across the street would be tough!

The newly formed gang had significantly cheered up, the boss did not lie to them! And the Predator, unknown to most of them, turned out to be quite tangible and real. The food in the kitchen, and the new rifles in the hands of the lucky members of the gang spoke for themselves. These things could be touched, these didn't look like ghost guns.

And so, the choice was correct, you could follow such a leader. Perhaps even should…

And that's why the second raid was being prepared with much more enthusiasm! There was something to strive for…

The bags left in the apartment were, of course, picked up... At night, when no one was around. An inaudible and almost invisible shadow slipped gently into the next building entrance and quietly slipped through the balconies into the prepared apartment. The door was not only locked, but also booby-trapped. And to scare away any curious (and greedy) «treasure hunters," there were a bunch of bullet holes in the door, which clearly indicated the fate of the previous owners of the room. It said they tried to sit this out alone... The darkened bloody stain on the floor eloquently hinted at the outcome of all past disputes. In one word, nobody touched this door, or the bloody stains would have gotten bigger…

From this apartment the night guest snuck into the one where the bags were hidden.

An hour's work, and the contents were scattered... Some of them nearby, in stashes, and some of them were dragged far away.

They were really waiting for the guys that left on the second raid. They were already looking forward to splitting up the future loot. Some military uniforms were shared by the trader, and the tramps dressed up. They say that appearance often determines behavior.

Some order was obvious in the gang, and the guys even pulled themselves together a little.

A day passed... another one... No one expressed any particular concern. Everyone remembered that the first time had taken even longer.

The first group came after dropping some more bags and backpacks at Khokhol's. His response was more than generous — food, flashlights, batteries. And a lot of other things, even including medicine! Those were badly needed!

Another day, and the second group appeared on the doorstep. A few minutes later three tramps dragged a heavy tarpaulin bag towards another address.

Two more bags were opened to the impatient shouts of the crowd.

Semi-automatic shotguns, several army guns, both for automatic and pistol cartridges! And ammunition for this whole arsenal…

The gang was no longer easy prey, even for a serious squad, almost everyone was armed! And purely due to their large numbers, many of the bullets they fired could very well find their goal, even if they were facing experienced opponents.

But the third group never showed up.

All the deadlines had long expired, but the search groups did not find anyone anywhere. No sign of them, as if they never existed at all. Clearly no one ventured too far, they searched the surrounding area. The coast itself was out of limits, that land belongs to someone else...

Chapter 21

“Well?” Ivan the Terrible descended down the stairs and looked in the basement. “Anything interesting?”

The torture cellar, formerly an ordinary basement, was a gloomy sight. There was a half-naked man hanging from the ceiling beam. Blood was flowing down his arms, twisted behind his back. His broken face was disfigured by beatings, and his breath intermittently whistled through his broken teeth.

Opposite him on a well-built stool was Dmitro Petrov, nicknamed the Conductor, the local torture specialist.

“Any living thing is sure to sing after I do my thing!» he loved to say.

And they sang... the executioner knew no pity. Nobody knew anything about his past, the only thing that was known was that he spent a decent chunk of time in prison for beatings and assault. And now, in these new conditions, he finally found his place in life.

“He’s singing... What the fuck else would he be doing?” the Conductor said as he wiped his hands with scraps of the victim’s clothes.

“And what did he sing? Who the fuck is he?”

“His boss is some Dimon Murky. They’re based in the city in the warehouses in a separate house. There’s no serious warriors, just a bunch of tramps.”

“They’re still alive?” Ivan grinned.

“Almost got wiped out recently, found some trouble with the Predator…”

Ivan the Terrible almost choked.

“With who?!”

“The Predator,» the executioner shrugged. “He almost multiplied them all by zero. This guy says he’s killed almost half the gang…”

“Why not everyone?”

“Murky made some deal and the Predator left... And made them his bitches. They started to work for him. He throws guns at them and doesn’t press them... They were dragging this load for him too.”

“Where did they get it from?”

“They got info on the stash. They were showed a photo, told where it was. This is the second time they’ve come here. The first one was exactly the same. They come to the location, and there, hidden behind bushes, are backpacks or tarpaulin bags. They’re covered with branches and leaves. Apparently it hasn’t been there long, the ground under the load hadn’t been marked by the weight yet.”

“What was in them?”

“In the bags that those guys dragged first were guns and ammunition. What the others had…” Dimitro shrugged. “He didn’t see, these bags were not brought to the camp.”

“Where did they go?”

“Two of them were taken to some apartment, and everything else was to Khokhol. He gave them food and other goods for the stuff.”

“Who tipped them off?”

“Murky said it was straight from the Predator. Part of it goes to him, and the rest to the gang.”

“Anything else that’s interesting?”

“He’s passed out... he’s not that strong... I’m gonna talk some more with him when he comes to.”

“Just make sure he doesn’t die from your talk! I still need the guy alive for now.”

When the ringleader went outside, he came up to the canopy. It had a table and some chairs under it. All this used to be the yard of an elite dacha. The owners had evaporated, gone hell knows where after the disaster. Although there was reason to believe that it’s clear, where they went —the car of the head of the family was still here. Nobody gave a shit about their fate. The dacha was now the base of Ivan’s group, and the group’s members were crashing in the house or the other buildings. Mikheev himself chose the second floor above the bathhouse to live, two comfortable rooms were there. It was enough for him…

The priest sat on one of the chairs, leaning back and covering his eyes. He often sat like that. Whether he was thinking about something, or just resting, no one tried to find out. After the massacre in the dungeons had greatly reduced the number of cultists, reinforcements arrived a couple of days later. And looking at these new arrivals, whose hands were clearly more accustomed to a sawed-off shotgun than a pick and shovel, no one dared call them “shit-miners.” They did not cause any inconvenience. They were accommodated in the barn they were offered, next to it they quickly set up a hearth for cooking. They brought everything necessary to make one (except the bricks and clay, of course) in their shoulder bags. That’s where they cooked, and that’s where they ate. They slept in the barn, with a guard always outside.

They didn’t talk to anybody or get involved in anything. But Peter spent most of his time talking to Ivan. He was a good conversationalist, very erudite, and was able to maintain a conversation on almost any topic.

He suggested placing secrets on the coast. He even pointed out where to plant them! Obviously, he had his own sources of information...

The first week didn’t have any effect. They saw some strays... mostly alone. Their fate was usually unenviable, very few managed to cross the open areas. And the forest... it didn’t really provide that much cover, and different groups were constantly marching through it. Some went to the sanatorium, which still had a fair amount of useful stuff. Others were coming back from there after having already picked some stuff up. And some of them were ambushing the previous two. In short, the forest wasn’t safe at all. In fact, it was very unsafe. If you entered, you were unlikely to leave... And your clothes and weapons would soon pop up at a trader. Unless, of course, your clothes were too dirty with blood…

So no one really thought about the loners. Their chances of survival were almost ephemeral.

“We have to wait for a group,» said the priest. «Five men…”

“Why?” The ringleader was puzzled.

“There was a group of USECs, about twenty people. There were some tramps along the way. Obviously they were handled, but not all of them... Some survived and were found. They said that it was not an ordinary squad of vagrants, some very tough pros! And they headed further along the coast. And then there was another detachment, not as tough professionals. And almost immediately they came back, including the guys who had recently destroyed the tramps. But there were fewer of them…”

“Well, they got in a fight with somebody… It happens…”

“And with whom?” The cultist tilted his head to the side. “I’ve asked your men if any of your people had raided those parts recently.

‘Oh, you bastard!’ A thought flashed through Ivan’s head. ‘He asked, huh! My guys?! Man, they’re gonna get it!’

But out loud he spoke different words.

“There’s a lot of people in those parts! Loners... BEARs... even gangsters sometimes, there’s no lock on the gate!”

“Maybe.” Peter did not argue. “But nevertheless, about ten people did not come back! And where did their weapons go? And their equipment? There was no extra cargo with the outgoing squad! They were carrying two wounded men. And that was it…”

“Who knows,” shrugged Ivan. “They’re lying in the woods somewhere.”

“I don’t think so…»

Subsequent events proved the priest right. A raiding patrol spotted a group of unidentified men dragging some kind of cargo towards the city. The pursuit attempt was not successful, the porters fired back and fled into a labyrinth of streets. The patrol did not follow — foreign territory, and it wasn’t a big group... it was better to not take the risk.

But the raiders made the right conclusions and the number of patrols tripled. For this, Ivan had to turn to the neighbors, promising them some of the prey.

But Ivan’s boys got lucky, they were the ones that intercepted the next group. The porters fired back till the last bullet. So only one of

them made it — his rifle jammed and he didn't have the time to reload... And now he was hanging on a hook in the Conductor's basement.

Ivan sat down and took a bottle of beer from the table — the guys recently gutted a basement with a bunch of supplies.

"So?" The priest opened his eyes. "What did he tell you?"

"You were right, they work for the Predator."

The cultist shrugged.

"I had no doubt... the Predator was obviously scouting something here... or negotiating with someone. And he isn't the kind of man that's gonna carry something on his own, there are less valuable people for that."

"Really?" The ataman smiled. "Find anything else interesting?"

Peter pushed the bag on the floor with his foot.

"Standard NATO duffle bag. It's nothing special, but it's not common. It's the USECs that have them. They're equipped in accordance with NATO standards."

He nodded at the contents of the bag lying on the floor.

"It's all from the USEC arsenal. There are no weapons, night vision devices, ammunition like that in the warehouses of police or the Russian army. The second bag is the same way. Conclusion?"

"Well…"

"USECs are handing this equipment over to the Predator. Trade or however else is not so important. They're cooperating. We know that

somewhere in these parts are warehouses for the group. We have to assume that whoever we tried to catch was looking for them. Either the USECs gave him the coordinates, or he managed to find out for himself somehow, it doesn't matter which. Without their knowledge he couldn't have managed to get anything out of there anyway."

"So now what?"

"Do we know the coordinates of these porters' base?"

"There's an address... There's about 50 people. But the building's well-fortified, there's only two entrances. And a concrete fence around it... it's gonna be a tough nut to crack!"

"But can it be taken?"

"Anything can be taken, the difference is the price you pay for it."

"Will you help us?"

"No," Ivan shook his head. "We won't go in ourselves, and none of my neighbors will. The city is not our territory, we do not go there. So, I'm sorry, but you're pulling this chestnut from the fire yourself…"

"Well…" The priest pursed his lips. "You've already helped us, we won't forget it. You know how to find me now. Ask... if there's anything…"

"Are you leaving?"

"If you don't mind, we'll leave in the morning."

"No problem!" The ataman rose to his feet. "And this stuff?"

He nodded at the weapons and equipment on the floor.

“You need it more, so you take it… I’ll grab a couple of the night vision devices, if that’s all right with you?”

“Take them! There’s enough to go around…”

In reality he did not want to give up the night vision. But... good relations with cultists were worth more. So, two pairs of night vision goggles is not that high a fee!

***

Murky also drew conclusions from the interrupted mission. He had the coordinates of three more stashes, but he knew that future raids wouldn’t be as easy.

He turned on the radio and called the Predator.

As always, the answer came quickly enough.

«Your task is carrying the contents of the stash from the coast to the city. You’ll be covered in the city, you can send your guys to Gavrish, he’ll help.»

Dimon could barely contain himself from excitement!

Gavrish... at other times he wouldn’t have dared to approach him as far as a cannon could shoot! The leader of a pretty serious gang and the leader of some street hooligans! They’re utterly incomparable! Murky knew what his men were worth. They’re utterly useless in anything serious! The fact that no one has wiped them out yet was a miracle!

Or... the Predator’s kindness?

The second was much more likely…

If he and Gavrish can be friends... such a man was worth listening to!

But is it one man?

The visit to the gang leader was not assigned to anyone, but in this situation it was imperative not to screw up! He took five guards with him so he would look more serious.

In spite of all his worries, they were met quite favorably, the ataman himself came out to greet the guests.

But they talked in private, and that was par for the course. Serious stuff is not to be discussed in public. And Murky strictly forbade his guards from talking, there's no need for anyone to know about the real state of affairs! Just in case…

"Sit down!" The bandit nodded at a chair by the table. "Would you like a drink?"

"Oh, yeah! I've brought something of my own…"

And suddenly there was a bottle of good cognac on the table, a trophy from one of the raids.

"Akhtamar…» The bandit looked the bottle over. "Are you imitating the boss? He enjoys this stuff a lot, too!"

Dimon didn't know anything about this, of course. How could he know who it is and what they like? But he nodded to agree just in case.

"Then, if you don't mind, I'll save it for him... And we'll drink vodka!"

And they did…

And again…

Dimon wasn't planning on being very honest with the gangster. He understood the difference in their positions quite well, Gavrish beat him in every conceivable measure.

But the experienced bandit became the ringleader for good reason, and he knew how to untie the tongues of people he was talking with. Without putting any real pressure on his guest, he managed to learn a lot…

When the guests finally disappeared behind the houses, he just smirked — everything worked out!

"Cannon fodder...» he told his assistant. "The Predator is using them. These vagrants aren't much use, but they'll do fine as porters. As warriors, they're no good at all…"

"What good is that to us?"

"There is some good... The Predator keeps us safe, doesn't shove us in random fights and doesn't set us up for heavy war. Again, look how he come in contact with them! Through the radio! None of them have ever seen anybody real, while Denis is talking to us personally, with respect! And not like with Boar! He comes to our place, but with Boar he only meets at Khokohl's."

"Well, I think he's friends with him too…» the assistant carefully noted.

"Friends, but not quite like that! They have business, that's true. But only business and nothing beyond that! While Vortex went on a mission with us himself! Appreciates it! And he trusts us!"

The ataman's comrade-in-arms was silent. He had his own opinion about this... but it was too early to express it…

However, the Gavrish gang fulfilled all the agreements.

They moved out to the agreed upon positions, set up in houses and took aim at the surroundings, in case they were followed.

But it was okay.

Nobody jumped out of the bushes, waving deadly weapons in the air. And there was no shooting…

The groups sent out for the shipment passed without interference.

And none of them paid attention to the fact that someone's keen eyes were closely watching all the movements of the porters.

All movement, without exception…

Without getting involved in the fight, and without indicating their presence, the observers detected firing points in the homes. Noticed the machine gun nests in the corner apartments, appreciating their location — they covered all the approaches. Climbing into this well-equipped and prepared trap would be suicide.

And no one tried to get in…

Chapter 22

If someone thinks that the locations of my stashes are chosen at random, they're wrong! Researched thoroughly, each include some extra equipment and at least two ways to leave. And in some places, I use all manner of improvised means. Jam a door, for example... or invent some other nasty thing. Yeah, there's a risk that someone random might get unlucky. Or even croak. So what? Does that mean that I should act like I'm in a fairy tale and think about everyone else? What will happen if a person tries to get into this particular hole, for example?

Well, they'll have to be pulled out… feet first. If there's someone to even drag them…

The current rule is everyone for themselves! Nobody's covering me, so I don't owe that to anyone!

So now I'm quietly clinging to the walls, sneaking up the stairs of yet another house. I have a plan to set up the usual passage through the balconies. Link up three apartments in separate entrances.

The task is not difficult, per se.

The balconies in the different entrances share a common wall made from asbestos and cement. To get through it with a hand drill is easy. Then I get into to the apartment, go to the next one through the staircase and make another hole in the balcony…

And then I was struck by something…

No, there was no sound. And there were no rays of light from enemy flashlights on the walls.

But there was a smell…

Not the stench of decomposing corpses, that wouldn’t surprise me much.

It smelled like food.

Hot food...

***

“Sanyok, what is it?”

The young guy, dressed in discreet, dark clothes, froze against the wall, clutching the shotgun in his hands. Without turning his head, he made a warning gesture. The old man, peeking out of the doorway, immediately placed an open tin can on the floor and grabbed his weapon. He was armed with a sawed-off Mosin rifle, a terrifying weapon at close range. A shitty office wall was not gonna stop that bullet. And almost any closet or door could be shot through. It made a hell of a noise, though... the shotgun wasn’t much quieter. Well, that means you gotta shoot less, that’s all. If you walk quietly, you’ll live longer!

“Something on the stairs seemed to be making noise…» said the young man with doubt. “I don’t understand…”

The eldest put out a candle with his hand and carefully approached his son.

They really were father and son.

Dmitry Volkov, better known among his comrades as «Wolf,» and his son Alexander. They both worked for a major trading firm, in the logistics department. When the situation went to shit, they, as ”the most responsible and experienced employees,» were tasked with a particularly important job — evacuating the families of the company’s

management. And they managed to complete the task, all the numerous (and very loud...) members of the executives' families were removed from the city as soon as possible. After that, the father and son had an opportunity to finally take care of their own family, which they quickly managed.

But then…

The crying of the «destitute» families of the leadership had become quite unbearable, and the father and son team received new instructions: to go to the country houses and apartments they evacuated the families from and bring the things they left behind. Some of the evacuees were quite unhappy without some expensive bag, others were suffering from a lack of access to their wardrobes and gadgets. Which makes sense, there were instructions to take people and leave the things!

Dmitry was hesitant, by that point posts were set up by the army, and everyone was warned that if they entered the city they'd not be let out!

The company's CEO promised Dmitry that their car had been issued a special pass! And they would have time to make one go for sure. But if they didn't go... Times are difficult... Did the firm need so many employees in trying times like this…

Okay... so they went.

They managed to make it into town, the pass worked. Two country houses were handled relatively quickly. No matter, just chucked everything in the trunk. If it tore or broke, whatever! They also grabbed all the food they found, and were surprised to find quite a lot! Gunshots were already rattling in the distance, and the father-son duo had no desire to test their luck by visiting the third out-of-town address.

Now for the city...

The hardest part. They moved through town using their bumper to move the cars that were abandoned in the street. Or maybe not abandoned... someone fired at their truck at one point. Apparently, someone thought they'd stop in front of the cars. But instead the truck simply pushed them aside, barely reducing its speed.

“We have to go back another way,» the son looked out the window and said anxiously. “There's obviously some scumbags hanging around here…”

“We will…” the father laughed, turning the steering wheel. “There's enough roads.”

One apartment, then another…

In the wall closet in the first apartment they found a shotgun, pump-action. A belt full of shells was hanging next to it. Sanyok pulled the handguard and a bright red shell slipped into the barrel.

“And how are you going to leave with this?” Dimitri asked.

“Before we approach the post, we'll throw it in the back. There's plenty of stuff in there... they won't find it. They're not really even looking, they don't have time for that. But it's a great tool against the guys that like shooting!”

“Well... up to you!”

They couldn't make it to the third address, something went off right in front of the car. The glass cracked.

“Fuck this! Let's go!” Wolf jerked the steering wheel. An experienced driver, he could easily drive a heavy truck or any car.

And the big heavy truck suddenly easily turned in the opposite direction.

It was chased with shots, the bullets tore the roof of the cab, the side mirror cracked and crumbled.

Shots were apparently fired from pistols — some of the bullets got stuck in the door upholstery. Didn't have enough power to pass through.

"Fuck you and see you in hell!" shouted Dmitri. "You can't get us!"

It was time to leave while there's still a chance. Fuck management's stuff, they already grabbed most of it out. They'll live without their rags! They'll buy new ones if they need it…

Another turn... the metal of a car screamed under the wheels of the truck… Bam! A trash can flew off to the side. Learn how to build barricades, you dopes!

A fence made from thick boards disintegrated. After making a loop across the territory of some construction site, the truck drove back out on an empty street. A couple more kilometers and they'd make it to the highway! And soon there would be a roadblock.

Sanyok was the one to notice the passenger car that suddenly appeared to the left. There were all sorts of unpleasant stuff sticking out of the open windows, so it would be unwise to let these assholes get ahead. They could shoot the tires off in a few seconds, and it wouldn't be much of an issue to rip apart the cabin either.

"They're not hitting anything essential...» The eldest spit out. "Smart motherfuckers! They have to carry the cargo somehow, and they can't fit it all in the passenger car... They wanna kill us! Okay…"

He took a look around.

“It’s a straight drive... not much of a problem... Come on, drive! Keep swerving, they won’t overtake you!”

Said and done, Alexander was in the driver’s seat.

A hit with the buttstock, and the rear window for the cockpit falls out. Then Dmitry pulled a folding knife out of his pocket and cut the tarpaulin, and the air flow immediately made the hole bigger.

After throwing the shotgun into the cargo area, the older man hung his ammo belt on himself and went through the window.

When a shotgun barrel suddenly popped out from under the canopy flapping in the wind, barely anyone had the time to react to it. And Wolf already had the driver in his sights.

Twenty meters away, even the shaking of the truck would have a large effect on the accuracy of the shots. Especially from a shotgun…

Bang!

The windshield of a nice foreign car became blurred.

Bang!

The glass from the passenger door rained down.

Return fire was chaotic and random — the passengers of the car fired everything at once, all barrels, without aiming.

Bang!

The foreign car swerved to the side and crashed into the concrete slabs by the road. The engine made a last noise…

Bang!

The truck slowed down. The driver’s door slammed.

“Dad! Are you okay?”

Dimitri fell back on the mound of stuff, dark spots visible on his clothes.

“Shit... One of them got to me... It hit my shoulder... and got my arm too…”

Sanyok swore, pulled up to the cargo area and picked up the shotgun. He quickly ran up to the passenger car.

“Brother, don’t shoot!” One of the passengers raised his head. “I’m…”

Bang!
Bang!
Bang!

“You rode your last ride, bitches! You’re fucked! I’m gonna check their trunk for a first aid kit…”

On top of that it turned out that the villains managed to shoot the back wheels. And there was only one reserve... After spending about an hour, Sanyok changed the punctured wheel. But this didn’t really increase their chances of getting to the checkpoint. And something had to be done about the wound, quickly!

That’s how the father and son ended up staying in Tarkov.

The truck was driven to a secluded place, which protected the contents of the cargo area from being immediately stolen, at least for

a while. Running around, Alexander found an old dude who knew something about wounds, since at one point he was an orderly in the hospital.

The wound was treated, bandaged, and relatively taken care of. The former orderly, Sergei Pavlovich, lived with them for about a week and was killed by some scumbags when he was returning from the truck with a load of things. But he managed to do his job — Dmitri was on the mend.

By the time he got back on his feet there was no chance of getting out of town, all entrances and exits were securely closed off. They had to settle here.

It must be noted, the father and son were very clever. Realizing that nothing, even the strongest three-layer steel door, could resist an ordinary hand grenade (and explosions boomed in the streets from time to time…), they went another way.

There was not a single whole pane glass left in their apartment, even from the street it very clear that there was nothing to find there. The front door hung on one hinge. But it was blocking most of the doorway... and there was some broken glass on the floor... so it would not be comfortable to climb under it. You could cut your hands! And getting over the top was very hard.

In any case there was no need for that — it was clearly visible that the apartment was utterly looted. There were cupboards on the floor, scattered stuff trampled by someone’s dirty boots. It screamed “everything was stolen before you arrived!» and there was nothing to look for in here.

The shelter itself was deep in the apartment.

And that’s where the father and son team showed true wonders of disguising themselves!

The entrance to one of the rooms was filled with broken bricks, as if the wall had collapsed. Something had exploded in the corridor (at least that's the story the sooty walls told), so it made sense the wall collapsed, partly covering the fallen furniture.

But the truth was that when you made it into the half-buried (man, how many bricks did they have to bring up...) closet, you could crawl right into another room. And that's where the shelter was. Not a single ray of light made it to their hiding place, and it was soundproofed. Several mattresses from neighboring apartments were thrown onto the floor, and the walls and windows were covered with carpets. A cabinet was also moved in front of the window.

Yes, it's dark... so what?

Nobody's gonna find this shelter by accident. And even if it wasn't an accident, it's take some real hard thinking!

The occupants of this room also had insurance in case they needed a sudden escape — a break in the wall was made into the adjacent entrance. The other opening was covered by the back of a sofa. The sofa itself was generously sprinkled with blood, it was easy enough to find in the streets... But no one would lie down to rest on it!

After gutting the contents of their truck, the goods (mainly food) were hidden in several caches. There was quite a bit of distance between them. Each cache also had a reserve gun — the passenger car shot by Sanyok expanded the family arsenal.

They left their shelter only at dusk, and returned home at dusk too. For now they were lucky — neither of them were seen by anyone else.

But the smell of food wasn't something they thought of... or hell, who can blame them, who would?

Chapter 23

I cling to the wall and listen.

Hard to be sure…

There's no clear sign that anyone's here, at least I don't see any. No bolts clattering, no capsule hissing. And no one's heavy breathing can be heard around the corner. But there's still something I can't quite put my finger on…

Certain conditions can make a person change in strange ways. They start paying attention to things that they would have ignored without thinking before. I used to be a normal person! Not some superman warrior. And yet here I am... Coldly calculating the best way to install another charge, with a habit of shooting to kill my opponents on the spot… And not once did I have a desire to scare away my opponents! Not all of them are patented villains after all... there are normal people!

Yeah, right, in Tarkov…

When's the last time you saw any normal people around here lately, dear?

My instructors at the cop base seem like cool dudes, but who can tell how many graves have been dug in their wake?

Oleg, my technician.

He's a peaceful man…

But he didn't refuse to install the deadly automatic turrets, did he? He was not fazed by the fact that a single turret can shred a hundred people at a time, if there's ammo. And there was a lot of it…

Yes, he's protecting his life. Whose life am I protecting?

If you look at things this way, you can justify anything! Nobody robs for no reason, everybody's fighting for their lives.

For their lives…

To make it as comfortable and peaceful as possible.

And the fact that you have to kill to do that… that just comes with the territory.

What a life I lead now…

***

"Red Two to Foxtrot!"

"This is Red Two."

"Entering quadrant 8-11. Nothing suspicious on the route."

"Foxtrot, check control point three, motion sensor triggered."

"Roger that, Red Two."

Looking around carefully, the USEC patrol was making its way down the street. There was no one dumb enough to walk in the middle of the street, they moved along the houses using any obstacle they found as cover. The corner of a building, an abandoned car — anything that could hide them from unfamiliar eyes. And even better, protect from anyone else's bullet!

The route was familiar and well-known. They had passed it more than once or twice, and all suspicious spots were checked several

times over.

Sensor triggered... it happens... It’s a fairly common thing. There’s always something happening in the city. A rotten piece of wood falls, some sheet metal slides off a roof... or a person could have passed by. It’s not the Sahara Desert, people are much more common than one person per fifty square kilometres! Although, in all honesty, with some people you wouldn’t want to breathe the same air, let alone meet them!

Even calling them people is an overstatement!

Here is the spot…

Hiding behind the corner of a building, the head of the patrol carefully examined the free-standing building through the rifle sight.

The windows on the ground floor were barricaded at one point, and the front doors had mines installed. At one point it was a USEC stronghold, but circumstances changed, and the need (or maybe even the possibility...) of defending this building was gone. But nobody was going to leave it just like that! So they installed trip mines at the entrances, and supplemented them with motion sensors. That way, they would be able to react to anyone’s attempt to clean this place out in a timely manner. And also punish anyone so daring! Of course, there’s been no equipment in the building for a long time, but it was of a certain value as a fortified position. Whoever is in there can control a tactically important intersection. And, they can make it much more difficult, or even impossible, to pass along these streets. From this point you can easily shoot and hit targets at 500 meters, that’s mighty unpleasant!

Doors... well, you can’t see the front door from here, there is a protective barricade of sandbags and concrete blocks. We made sure that the exit couldn’t be shot at from the street…

But there’s no sign of anything blowing up when you look at the building. And there’s plenty there to blow up.

Okay, let’s make the preliminary conclusion that no one went inside…

Moving to the side, the soldier examined the embrasures of the ground floor in the same manner and with the same result. Although it’s impossible to make it inside through the narrow holes, but... an order is an order!

“Foxtrot to Red Two…”

“Listening, this is Red Two.”

“Preliminary estimate — negative. No sign of forced entry. Transitioning to phase two.”

“Copy that, Foxtrot. Permission granted for phase two.”

That means they’re going in…

No one was planning on sneaking past their own mines. Neither was anyone planning on uninstalling them. There was a backup way to get inside.

There was a ladder near the house, under a pile of garbage. Made from water pipes, it could hold the weight of a couple of fighters in full gear. And it didn’t need any care... it could have laid there for two years or even more.

After looking around, two of the patrolmen slipped into the pile of garbage. After a minute, the ladder appeared. There were no traps or mines on this side of the building, the passage was relatively safe. Although it could be shot at from the embrasure of the stronghold... but this could not be avoided, they had to take risks.

But there were no shots fired. In fact, the situation remained relatively calm.

In just a few moments the ladder was against the wall. At the same time its lower edge rested on a specially placed concrete block that used to be part of the sidewalk. The Russians call it a strange word: “porebrik.” But to be fair, it’s not the only strange word in their vocabulary…

After climbing the stairs, the fighter dropped to the floor of the second-floor balcony. It was more of a decorative balcony, but it was possible to lie down on it. The low barricade protected from gunfire from the street.

Quiet…

No gunshots, no movement at all.

After a bit of waiting the soldier got up and moved towards the balcony door. It was usually locked... but someone who had special knowledge could easily open it.

Which is what happened, moments later the soldier silently slipped inside.

A little time passed, and he appeared on the balcony again. He waved his hand to say it was clear and they could go in.

Inside the building felt somewhat uncomfortable, as it always feels in houses that people have left behind. The ubiquitous drafts were blowing garbage along on the floor. Where the garbage was from is impossible to tell. It’s always there when you don’t expect it, sometimes it seems that in Tarkov it self-generates at an alarming rate.

“Examine the premises!” nodded the head of the patrol. “Check the sensors! And determine the cause of the triggered sensor.”

The fighters nodded almost in sync and went in opposite directions. Their commander threw his weapon behind his back and approached the control panel of the alarm to download the log of the system. Since they were already here, might as well pass on this information to the officer on duty.

But he only managed to make it a few steps down the stairs…

Something yanked at his leg hard, he lost his balance and rolled down with a crash.

‘That’s weird!’ A thought flashed through his head. ‘Marcus had just passed this staircase!’

The rumble from the body falling echoed in other rooms. Although the echo was a bit strange... and sounded more like gunshots.

***

“Well?”

“He’s alive, Brother Peter. He was just moving…”

“Get him up.”

A jerk and his back hurts. Sight focuses slowly…

In front of him were several figures in capes with hoods.

“What’s your name?”

“Jeremy J. Clark, second class operator... and you’re... you’re cultists?”

“If I were you, I’d choose my words carefully!” One of the people standing in front of him shook his head. “We’re Witnesses!”

“Leave him alone, Brother Mark,” another figure appears to the side. “He’s not fully recovered yet, and his mind is clouded. Put him in a chair and give him some water.”

He was slowly coming to, his eyesight was almost completely restored. But... it would have been better not to see any of this!

The shrouded figures were searching his comrades’ bodies, taking off their equipment and weapons. As far as he could see, no one else from the patrol was alive besides him.

“Are you okay?” One of the sectarians sat across from him. “Can you talk?”

“Yeah... I can talk.”

“Brother Peter! He’s ready!”

Another caped figure sat across from him. He threw his hood back.

“My name is Peter. Your leadership knows me. I revealed my face on purpose, so you could describe my appearance to them. Don’t let them think that somebody else attacked you dressed as us. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I do.”

The cultist nodded.

“We met a while ago. And I made a proposal. Your supervisor is Mark Forbett…”

“He’s not mine, he’s counterintelligence. And he doesn’t speak for everyone…”

Peter was silent for a moment.

“And yet he accepted our offer. He didn’t object or ask for time to think about it. He promised to cooperate…”

The operator cheered up a little. So far, he didn’t see a clear plan to kill him, that was encouraging! Such detailed conversations are not conducted with someone that’s about to die!

“But he has not kept his promise. What’s more, you continued to cooperate with our enemy. He is not your friend, as Forbett said. As it turns out, he’s not your enemy either…”

“I... I don’t quite understand…”

“Predator. We talked about him. Your helping him is a proven fact. We’re withdrawing our offer. You saw how we work. Now it’s your everyday reality, live with that.”

“Am I to pass all this on?”

“Word for word. You only have one chance.”

“I’m listening!”

“You must give us the Predator. Or the man who speaks for him. The last one is actually preferable. We’re not giving him any time to think. Forbett knows how to give us a signal. In case he has something to offer us of course… He should think hard!”

The operator licked his suddenly dry lips. The prospect of actively fighting with these scumbags, too...

“I’ll pass it on! And my comrades?”

“Forget about them. The worst thing has befallen them, they’ll never see the Coming…”

***

“After that I was escorted to our post and released...» Clark finished his story.

“Did the priest tell you anything else? Maybe someone else spoke?”

“No, sir!” The operator shook his head. “I didn’t see him again! He disappeared almost immediately after we talked... and the other cultists weren’t so sociable.”

“I see... Thank you, Mr. Clark, you’ve completed a big job for us all! You are free, you should get some rest! I’ll make sure you aren’t disturbed.”

When the door behind the operator closed, the counterintelligence officer turned to Honer.

“Charles, is there something I don’t know? Or did one of your men go rogue? Which one of them is cooperating with the Predator?!”

“Sir! With all due respect! I would ask you to choose your words! There isn’t anyone that would be in cahoots with him, too!”

“Too? So there are those that are cooperating with someone else?”

For a while both officers stared at each other intensely, then Forbett slowly nodded.

“I’m sorry, Charles... You have to understand... news like this, it’s enough to throw anyone off their balance…”

“I understand, sir... But, what do we do now? The cultists are the last thing we need!”

“Send one of your guys to this... what’s his name... the merchant!”

“To Khokhol?”

“I don’t care if you ask the devil, tell the trader I want to talk to the Predator!”

Chapter 24

When the radio beeped on the table, and Khokhol's hoarse voice pulled me out of my slumber, I didn't even understand what was happening. I jumped up to the table (unsuccessfully attempting to get my foot in the pant leg en route) and grabbed the radio.

"I am here! What did you want?"

"You had a guest…"

"Fuck you... for real? Asking specifically for me?"

"Not you, I won't lie to you. Your boss."

"Okay, I'll stop by when I'll be going past…»

By the way, I've seen many definitions of comfort in all the books I read. Some need an air-conditioned suite. Someone else needs a private oceanfront villa, as well as the latest Mercedes with a bombastic blonde at the wheel. By the way, I've always wondered, why blonde? What, are brunettes much worse? In my life I've mostly spent time with brunettes, and do not feel much discomfort about that…

But I have my own definition.

Other people quite possibly would think I'm insane, but for me it's sleeping naked without a machine gun under my pillow. I just really enjoy sleeping in a regular bed, and that's it! And it doesn't matter if the bed is just a regular soldier's bunk, not some posh bedroom. Good enough.

I really should visit the trader. The man already owes me a pretty substantial debt. And someone who regularly doesn't pick up the

money owed to them causes many suspicions, reasonably. I don't need that…

I only made to the trader the next day. Before that, I contacted the gangsters and asked the ataman to send someone to carefully check the surrounding building. Not for nothing, of course... I don't try to nickel and dime these details. Gavrish could do this for free... but I had my own reasons... let him think that I don't go to Khokhol alone. And he'll draw appropriate conclusions from that fact.

The trader greets me in a very friendly manner, with cognac.

We drank a big shot each and chased it down — he placed a jar of tinned ham and some fish on the table. Very nice overall!

"There was a man here from USEC…"

"And what did he want?"

"They've got this... Um... tough dude. Mark Forbett."

"Well," I shrug, "maybe they have him... Maybe he's tough... So what?"

"He's demanding a meeting with the Predator."

"Is he crazy? Even I, though I've been working with the Boss for a long time, don't have the right to demand anything from him! Asking is allowed! But demanding…"

I shake my head and pour myself another drink.

"Let's go!"

We had a drink, we had a snack.

“What should I tell him?”

“The same thing you might tell anybody… we will find him…»

Khokhol’s face changes.

“Not in that sense!” I calm the trader. “The boss has business with you, I have a piece of it too... so why the fuck would I break this shit down? If anything happens, you’re gonna lose, right?”

“Obviously!”

“Well, I’m as good as anybody! And I dislike these shootouts as much as the next guy. When are they gonna send you a guy?”

“Well, he’s still here. In the house next door, I found an apartment for situations like this. That’s where he’s sitting. And three of my boys are looking out, just in case…”

I grab a radio from my vest.

“Give it to him. Tell him to make sure it ends up on the table of this... what’s-his-name…»

“Forbett?”

“Yeah! That’s the one! But get him to put it on his table quietly! If he does that, he’ll have a separate bonus from me. Let him check the radio, of course, for any issues or hidden bombs, just don’t break it! I don’t want any suspicions to fall on you…»

***

The morning started with trouble — some invisible shooters opened fire on the patrol. Overall, it was nothing special, rarely did a day pass without it. But this ambush... it was very clever. Shotgun

salvage on the legs, and then long distance shooters joined. Bullets from old Russian rifles could cause trouble at a great distance! And considering they were shooting at relatively slow-moving targets…

In short, three people didn't make it.

So it was no surprise that Forbett was in a terrible mood. Yeah, a runner came back with a report, the trader got the message from Mark. He said, «I'll let you know as soon as the Predator's men come to me." But when will that be?

Cultists suddenly showed themselves as very good warriors, attacked from ambushes, didn't run head on and overall acted very carefully. Certainly, they had losses, but how serious were they? And how long could this senseless confrontation last?

And what even made any sense in this place?!

No prospects, leadership far away, barely any communication (any that exists is basically amounts to telling us to hang on). Like we would have run amok without their «wise» instructions long ago…

"Mark?"

The counterintelligence officer looked around.

No one... he was in the room alone.

"Mark, can you hear me?"

What the hell... what the fuck is this?!

"Forbett! Answer me!"

He jumped up and circled the room, trying to identify the source of the sound.

A walkie-talkie! In the pocket of his own jacket hanging from a hanger near the door. And it got caught on something…

“Yes! I’m listening! Who’s this?”

Chuckle — the person on the other end is clearly having fun.

“And who would you like to hear? This is Karasev... we talked recently…”

“Okay…» Forbett sat down on his chair. “How did you... whatever! I want to talk to your boss!”

“You’re not the only one who wants to talk. Alas... he’s not easily accessible. Even I can’t always get in touch, and we’ve been working together for years!”

“I have a business proposal for him!”

“And what do you think, are others inviting him for tea and biscuits? Nobody approaches him unless they have business!”

What? Biscuits? Tea? Shit…

Pull yourself together!

“Tell you what... Denis? Can I call you that?”

“Yes, you can.”

“I admit there are some... um... differences between us. I suggest we forget them. For our part, we are prepared to compensate you for some inconveniences that we caused.”

“This is finally serious talk. I’m listening.”

“Not on the radio. Can I see you in person?”

“You know a place where we can do that. Your man was there just the other day. The only thing is... you must understand that this is not your territory. And the appearance of a large squad could be perceived, uh, ambiguously.”

“There won’t be many of us. And I’ll coming to the actual location on my own.”

“Yeah, that’s good. It’ll take me a day to get there.”

“We’ll be there in time…”

The counterintelligence officer put the walkie-talkie on the table. He noticed that it was from his own stock! A hint? Fuck knows... but the connection’s been established in any case! Wonder how that radio got here in the first place…

Whatever! That can be figured out afterwards... The main thing is that now there is a channel of communication, and tomorrow he can finally meet this mysterious person, Karasev, face to face.

***

“We have examined the location where the Scavs had to drag the last load. No one has come yet.”

It hasn’t been that long... The Predator is careful. And his people, as he had understood for a while, aren’t very quick to make decisions either. As it follows from the prisoner’s testimony, they received almost all the things and most of their weapons through these caches. It is possible that this cache is also intended for someone else.

“So, Brother Peter, the person we are interested in may not even go there?”

The priest took a few steps around the room. He stopped by the window and looked outside.

“Maybe... but I’m still expecting him. He has to supervise the shipment. It’s obvious that he received it initially. Or at least he packed these bags. They’re packed in such a way that losing one or more wouldn’t cause a critical shortage of anything. There’s a certain expertise to it…”

“Is he military?”

“I don’t think so…” The priest shook his head. “He would have acted in other ways. There’s a different logic to his thinking... not military…”

“Special services?”

“No. Not any I know, at least. There’s a logic to his actions... but I don’t know what it is. He’s clearly not acting on a hunch, his actions have been carefully calculated.

“Or he has a competent leader,» said the other man.

“And how do they exchange information so quickly? Over the radio? That would require very detailed and extended conversations! Sooner or later someone would hear them! There’s no Internet here, most computer networks are out of order... And he is clearly not afraid of being disliked, he is not close friends with anyone. He’s killed gangsters, raiders, BEARs…”

“It’s simpler to list the fractions he didn’t touch!” Peter’s companion shook his head. “I don’t think there are any. On the other hand, a lot of people are afraid of him. And they try not to fight with him.”

“Yes,” nodded Peter. “He killed the Scavs, but now they work for him. He killed bandits, but now they don’t want revenge... Fear is his strongest weapon. A tool! Such a man has to either be on our side... or he must not be out there at all!”

The cultists were getting ready. As is their principle, they avoided visibility, not appearing in open streets or hovering in windows. It was simpler for them to break through or dismantle a brick wall than it was to run along the facade. And through this hole they could easily make it into the next entrance. It’s better... no one sees them. And they can enter buildings from beneath the ground, by breaking through the cable ducts or sewage pipes.

So nobody noticed them preparing.

But prepare they did!

The stash was already under observation from at least two spots. And they were hurriedly preparing two more to securely cover all approaches.

***

‘They’re working! Cunning devils, didn’t ever show their noses. They’re looking at the street from deep in the apartments, only one sucker ever came to the window. And from that moment on, nothing! No one else is showing themselves. They have a spot on Proletarskaya, on Granin street... I assume that they’re controlling from some other spot, too... How do they move between buildings? The whole road is underground? Inside, it’s fairly simple to break through the walls, I do that often…’

I noticed some strange activity by an unknown group on the fourth day after I gave Murky the coordinates of the stash. I didn’t pay much attention to it. Who knows who might be walking around here and why? After a couple more days I can pick my stuff up. I estimate

the cargo wasn't supposed to arrive until yesterday anyway. And maybe even later... I remember getting away from the coast, it was a serious adventure! You can only plan approximately here, it's Tarkov! Nothing's permanent but trouble.

The activity in the vicinity were not a surprise, this was no man's land. What do I care if someone ambushes someone else, they shoot each other, what's it to me? You won't survive long in this world if you get into every shootout!

But when these thugs began to equip a third spot, I became worried! All they had to do was make another final spot and it's over! Nobody would be able to retrieve the stash, everything will be covered! This trap is set for people that would approach the stash. And judging by how thoroughly and imperceptibly these dudes operated, the conclusion was rather sad. These are cultists, and it can't be anyone else! Sewers and holes in walls are their thing! Their style, if you will…

So, what do I do now?

My alarm was still intact.

It's very simple.

Anyone who walks through the door will inevitably trip over a thin thread and it will rip. And that will trigger a half-liter bottle to fall from the fourth floor. Currently it's on the windowsill, and the thread keeps it from falling. There's one more detail in the system, but I'll leave that for later…

There's also no news from Murky about this team, and I don't like it at this point. It's taken longer before... but no one's ambushed the transfer site in those cases.

I could slyly visit Gavrish's bandits and give them the stash. They

would come in guns blazing, understandably. They're nearby, and I would hint at the ambush. Going up alone against hundreds of armed thugs... Mm-hm... a very brutal kind of suicide…

These guys would likely leave. They won't take useless risks.

But they'd just start preparing another nasty surprise for me, now I'm pretty sure of that. Somewhere where I couldn't see it.

No... I have to put pressure on them here. And make sure no one crawls out of here alive, if that's possible.

Chapter 25

“We got this thing…» An interesting bag appears on the table in front of the sniper…

Yuri Gruzny doesn’t give away his excitement, but his eyes... they speak for themselves.

For there is a very nice toy in the bag — a thermal sight for a rifle. According to the accompanying documents it can even be attached it to a large-caliber machine gun, it should be strong enough.

“Serious...» nods Yuri. “And what’s this for?”

“Well, not just because you have beautiful eyes, of course... Do you know building five on Granina?”

The shooter shrugs. “I’ve been there... why?”

“Look…” A map of the city appears on the table.

It’s an ordinary tourist map. There were thousands of them, if not millions, sold in the kiosks to help tourists find their way around the city. Now there are no tourists, and none expected. But the kiosks are still standing there... still full of the wares they sold. All the useful stuff, like razors, lighters, and so on, have been taken ages ago. But they had no use for all the paper, so they just left it. But somebody left it, and so somebody else can pick it up…

“This is the building, the twenty story one, right?

“Actually, it’s nineteen. Twentieth is the maintenance floor. Pipes, air conditioning... and other bullshit.”

“Yeah? There are windows there, I saw them.”

“Fake, some are even bricked up. I know this floor, I’ve been there…”

Oh, I see. Our shooter has skeletons in his closet... and this closet has to be a walk-in, I’m sure…

“Look at this…» I draw on a map. “These spots... Can you control them from there?”

“What’s the target?”

“People... sitting in apartments, I marked the windows. In this building, they’re on the second floor, in this one on the third. They’ll be watching over house number five. They think someone will pay a visit there.”

“And are they right?”

“I suppose they are. Except they won’t let the visitor out of there. They’ll kill him or try to take him alive. Although I’m not sure they’ll pull this off…”

The sniper’s smirking.

“Look, they’re sitting inside the apartments, hiding. I think that’s where they’ll probably shoot from, too. Although... who the hell knows what they’re thinking…”

“Well, it’s no matter... how many are there?”

“I’ve seen six of them so far. They’re gonna put somebody in right here, too.” I show the potential spots on the map.

“I can’t shoot here, the angle is wrong, won’t hit it from the top floor. Especially if they go deep into the apartment. And besides, I can’t

look in all four directions at once. No one could."

"Good," I nod. "I'll try to figure this one out for myself…"

"Then it's a deal!" Yurets is weighing the scope in his hand. "How are we calculating the finances? This, as I understand it, is a deposit. Good advance, no question! I calculate its worth as ten people and all the preparation. Is that okay?"

"Agreed. And the rest at our usual rate."

Yurets nods in agreement, this issue is settled…

It's really useful to read instructions for weapons! You can find all sorts, from a simple pistol to a cannon. Well, there's no cannon here, and I don't have a book on my ZIG. Although that doesn't matter, I already know this weapon.

But I do have one for something else…

Besides that, there are all sorts of useful things in our warehouse... which in regular life were used for peaceful purposes.

But life is strange and unpredictable now. As they say in movies, "When the going gets tough — adapt!"

I've had it tough... for a while! So I had to brainstorm.

It's a useful thing, a remote-controlled servo. They install surveillance cameras, spotlights, and other useful things on them. And in Terra Group they also install machine guns…

Well, I'm not installing a machine gun on it. Not because I'm greedy, of course. You could shoot though a serious brick or reinforced concrete wall, in theory... but while it's happening, the person on the other side of the wall would have time to have a smoke and tie their

shoelaces. Useless shooting doesn't help anyone.

***

"All right, then!" Murky coughed. "We got a job…"

The job wasn't too difficult this time. Find some special crates in a certain location. Gently, without banging them or dropping them, bring them to the specified location. Carry them up to a specific apartment. If the door is locked, take it out carefully. Don't make any noise! Don't yell or fight with your coworkers.

Get the crates into the apartment and take up position nearby so no one would steal it.

"Carry it carefully, it could blow up!"

"Okay... we're no fools, we'll be careful!" the tramps answered.

"I'll give you walkie-talkies, we got some from the merchant. Sit and listen! There's a number on each radio. If they call your number, do as they say!"

"Will we have to shoot?" somebody asked.

"Unlikely... maybe have to kill some loner... but they'll warn you about that! Until then, everyone stay quiet!"

***

"Good afternoon!" I greet Khokhol's guard.

He responds with a welcoming gesture and steps aside. I go inside.

Where's the guest?

There he is, in the nook with the table is an older man in a military uniform.

“Good afternoon, Mark!” I sit down on the chair across from him.

“Hello... Denis…”

The trader is operates as a silent shadow, the usual bottle of cognac appearing on the table. Khokhol drinks a glass with us and retreats to the counter.

He understands that not everything that is said here should be heard, it could have a harmful effect on his health. Smart man!

“So, I’m listening…”

“How soon can you pass on my request to your boss?”

“Tonight, when he gets in touch. But, as I recall, this is not where our conversation started. You made a promise…”

The USEC nods.

Raises his hand and makes a gesture.

“Yes?” The trader appears next to us.

“We’re opening,» the counter-intelligence nods in my direction, «a credit line. For fifty thousand euros.”

He looks at me questioningly.

“Well…”

“A hundred thousand.”

“That’s suitable.”

Khokhol goes back to his place. Moves away deliberately, as if saying that he’s busy doing his own thing and can’t hear us. And not listening…

“Is this matter settled?”

“It’s settled. What’s next?”

“You’re not liked by cultists.”

“Hmm! Do they even like anyone?”

Forbett smiles and nods at the knives hanging from my belt.

“I suppose this dislike is mutual.”

“In your own words, it’s nothing personal, just business! They interfered with us…”

“Well, if that’s the case, I think we’ll come to an agreement…”

And we did…

Afterwards, I hang out near the drop point again. That’s where Murky’s group was supposed to bring the goods, and they disappeared without a trace. And I think I know the reason...

***

“Brother Peter!”

The priest opened his eyes and stood up sharply. Lately he has not left, sleeping in one of the empty apartments.

“Yes?”

“Looks like he came... Our posts saw a man walking around the building. And, no, he hasn’t been identified. He shows himself just for a moment…”

Peter rubbed his face.

“Okay... Got it... Send the cargo team, let them take every precaution. On the way out imitate an attack of the Scavs, none must leave!”

“But…”

“The Predator will most likely contact the group at the warehouse to get confirmation of delivery. And who would confirm that? After all, none of them are alive, nor have they been for a long time! If he doesn’t see them die with his own eyes, he simply won’t believe it. And he will quietly sell the secret of this stash to someone else, maybe to bandits, to let them deal with it…”

“But these are our brothers…”

“And they must not show a shameful lack of strength!”

“Forgive me, Brother Peter! I was mistaken…”

“He who has opened hie eyes in time, may he be forgiven! Go on, my brother…” And a gesture of blessing was made by the priest.

***

This world will be destroyed by greed. And excessive curiosity.

There’s always someone out there who wants to steal from a stranger and stick their curious nose where it doesn’t fucking belong.

But turning on one’s head... no, that doesn’t happen…

Control triggered.

Which means the ambush is already in place.

Why is that?

It’s simple...

What did the instructions say?

«Go up to the fourth floor of building number five on Granina. First entrance, apartment sixteen. Go out on to the balcony and throw the bags over to the next balcony.”

So there’s no need to go into the apartment with the stuff on the balcony. What’s more, the instruction states the opposite!

And yet someone went in.

What’s more, they’re still sitting there, I suppose they’re waiting for me.

The bottle’s fallen from the windowsill, as expected. And, of course it shattered into a million pieces against the tarmac downstairs. No miracles here.

But!

It wasn’t a fool that went in there.

Or rather, it wasn’t a fool that planned this.

I’m guessing this apartment was studied from afar. They looked carefully at the windows, the doors…

And the bottle was almost certainly noticed too. I'm not sure if anyone drew any conclusions from it. But they remembered it…

And when it broke into tiny shards, they took care to put a similar looking bottle in the same place. Like nothing happened... as if nobody touched the door to the apartment.

Does that make sense?

Yeah, it makes sense.

So what makes me so sure that there's someone in the apartment?

The bottle is empty!

The bottle that was here before was two-thirds full of water. And there was also a piece of paper stuck to the bottom... It happens, you place a bottle down and something sticks to it from below. It's a normal situation, nothing special…

But only I knew about this.

And through good optics all these details can be easily made out. If you know what to look for…

Whoever replaced the bottle was not aware of all these details.

If the apartment was visited by a regular Scav, these little details would not influence him in the slightest. Knocked down the door, looked around, took what was there and poof, gone! Why would he care what happened out on the windowsill?

But whoever's sitting there now didn't get in by accident. They replaced the broken bottle, because they saw the string that led there and made the appropriate conclusions.

So, there’s an ambush in there…

The people are confident I’ll go in the same way, through the second entrance, and grab the cargo through the balcony.

Well, guys... blessed is he who believes...

There are the Scavs, a small squad nearby. They’re walking carefully, looking around... and in general behaving properly.

And this, frankly, is what puzzles me the most. I’m not much of a specialist in military affairs, but the approaching squad is surprising. Where did Murky’s men suddenly learn to act like competent warriors? The team is a bunch of random guys! I saw them... just recently. The fact that they, thanks to my efforts, managed to dress up and arm themselves, has not turned any of them into an experienced soldier yet. And yet here we are…

And one more detail.

They’re carefully avoiding looking in the direction of the firing spot I saw. Of course no one is popping out of the windows, and joyfully gesturing to greet the passers-by. But... you have to look in that direction, at least occasionally... it would make sense, anyone could be sitting in those houses? This is your first time here, how would you know?

Whatever, let them walk, what’s it to me. But I make a mental note…

Nothing special happened. The guys came up to the entrance, looked around, took up positions nearby. After that, a couple of them entered the building and after a while one of them came back out. I see, reconnaissance of the building…

The bags I know well (hell, I actually packed them) were carried

inside, and a few minutes later the porters, already empty-handed, appeared on the street.

It’s all so well-coordinated... I’d watch this for hours! Not a single unnecessary move!

The squad, looking around, walked away briskly.

Sitting here, I’m trying to figure out what I just saw.

These are Scavs?!

Come on... that kind of coherence? I’ve never seen them act like that before…

Bang! Doom! Ra-ta-ta!

Somewhere behind the building bursts of automatic fire were making a racket. Not just rifles, there seems to also be a machine gun... And right from where the porters went.

Run headfirst at every sound of gunfire? I’ve never been that much of an idiot, even before, and now…

And why bother, if I can climb upstairs and look through my binoculars?

I was right, the shootout was with this very group, they didn’t go far…

There are some guys walking around the bodies, turning over the dead, picking up their weapons and equipment. It’s just a typical picture for this area, nothing special. Some people are luckier than others, but not everyone.

By the way, where’s the machine gun? I don’t see the machine gunner! And I heard him!

When they finished looting the dead bodies, the victors headed out somewhere in a crowd. The machine gunner never showed up.

What’s that supposed to mean?

Was he sitting in some ambush?

I don’t get it...

Chapter 26

“He will come at night,» the priest lowered his binoculars. “I’m sure he at least heard the gunfire. Or maybe he was watching what was unfolding from somewhere…”

He nodded at the nearby building.

“That’s what I would do if I were him.”

“Why at night?” his assistant asked.

“He always comes in the dark. That’s what the Scavs call him, ‘master of the night.’ I think he uses all sorts of gadgets. It could look almost mystical from the other side. Especially for people who are not knowledgeable.”

“Yeah, it could.”

“It’s okay, we’re ready for that, too…”

Night falls…

It’s dark around here, no lights or anything. You can only move around normally with night vision, only then do you have a chance of not hitting something with your head or tripping over something. Or if you know the route very well.

But the goggles can be clearly seen from outside!

That’s really shitty.

And an ordinary flashlight is so dumb, it’s not even worth talking about. I don’t think there’s anyone dumb enough to use one that’s still alive. They died, some by themselves, some with help. The light

is a great target, especially when using a shotgun. A couple of centimeters in any direction doesn't make much difference.

"There's movement!" For a second the cultist looked away from the thermal imaging camera and turned to the priests. "Someone's coming up to the building!"

"Tell everyone to stand by!"

The walkie-talkie squeaked, and a voice could be heard. The observer again turned to the thermal imaging device and looked into the darkness.

"Brother Peter! More movement, someone is coming from the direction of building number seven!"

"How many people?"

"I see two…"

"So…" the priest walked along the room. "Who could that be? His buyers? They're hoping to carry the whole load with two people? Well, they won't get far... Although... Brother Leonid!"

"Yes, Brother Peter!"

"Send a signal to the posts is to let these by as well. Hold your fire! When they reach the building, start moving out! Take everyone alive!"

"Roger that! I'll pass it on!"

"When they enter the building, we move out, too. I have to see... I have to talk to him!"

Crunch, crunch... What the hell keeps crunching under his feet?

There’s a lawn... the ground should be soft...

“Target number one has entered the building.”

“Keep looking!”

Silence.

“Targets two and three have gone behind the building, can’t see them from here.”

“Keep looking! If they’re walking past, they’ll come out on the other side in a minute or two.”

Pause.

“I’m not seeing the targets.”

“Main team, move out! They’ve entered the building!”

You can see the steps in the greenish light of the night vision goggles. All kinds of garbage, some rags…

This is where I’m gonna spend some time... we have an important task.

The sensor beeped. I can keep walking. It’s better not to stay too long…

***

“Sanyok, hold the box... I need a minute…” The man sat down on the steps and waved his hands.

“Aha!”

He disconnected the wire.

A thin string was stretched low above the floor. Almost invisible from the side, it still guaranteed any intruder would fall face down into broken glass. It's simple, but when you fall onto broken bottles with your face... The guest is going to suck at battle…

"Here we go! Go through…" And the string is stretched across the aisle again.

The closet door slammed closed, separating the men from the street. The young man put the crate on the floor and took a burner out of the box on the floor.

"Now we can finally have a bite to eat... All day on our feet…"

"Tell me about it!" The father laid down on the mattress next to him. "My fucking legs are killing me!"

***

"A source of heat has been detected! Third floor, fifteen meters to the left of the stash!"

"What could it be?"

"I don't know... but it's definitely not human! The light signal doesn't fit at all."

"Huh!" The priest walked around the room excitedly. "Did we really find his hiding spot? Well... maybe... last time he was hiding in a regular apartment too…"

Sand squeaked under his heels, and the cultist turned sharply.

"Focus the group on this location! Capture!"

***

That weird smell again... food? Who's cooking something here? Although... wind? No, I don't think so, it's too far from the next building. Although there are weird drafts in some buildings... they can bring smells from all the way down in the basement. I never went there…

Some clever man from the city government ordered all the balconies to be decorated according to a single standard. For the sake of beauty I suppose…

That's why all the balconies in one stairwell were decorated with plastic. Each stairway has its own color. And the decorative panel was shared between both balconies. And because of that, a person moving behind it from one balcony to another can't be detected with any tools, I checked.

***

Hinges squeaked, and dark silhouettes entered the building almost silently.

"We go quietly!" whispered someone in the darkness. "Third floor!"

However, they entered through another entrance too, Peter decided not to leave anything up to chance.

A step... another one... the people that entered the building were not in a hurry. And before advancing a single step they carefully inspected the stairs ahead through the night vision goggles.

One more step…

***

In normal life this thing acts as a detector on doors. Someone enters a room, crosses an invisible barrier, and a beep sounds to announce visitors. No night vision will help, the detector uses an ultrasonic sensor, so the device can't see it…

But instead of an audible signal it's simple enough to connect an electronic detonator, the sensors sends even more voltage than it needs. And it goes off very well!

And so it did.

The explosion was so violent that any remaining glass on the floor flew out at once with the frames, some doors came off the hinges, and the metal front door flew off and made it a few meters.

I don't know how many people were in there, but I don't envy any of them. Two four hundred-gram charges distributed around... it wouldn't be good! So this direction doesn't much matter anymore…

I've got a radio in my hand.

"Yo, Eyes! This is Vortex!"

"I'm here…"

"You're free to fire! Do your thing! We have no friends here!"

I make myself comfortable in the corner of the room, aim for the front door and pull out... a tablet from my backpack.

The wi-fi router, recently installed in the apartment, is connected to an uninterruptible power source and provides reliable coverage within a three-hundred-meter radius. That's plenty!

I tap the icon…

A tripod mounted in a third-floor apartment with the swivel servo flashed its LEDs.

«Stop standby mode.”

Tap the icon, “confirm.»

«System activated. Battery status — 74% charge.”

«Suspension calibration.”

The servomotors hum quietly, the swivel servo moves back and forth.

«Calibration complete.”

I tap the icon and a green laser spot appeared on the wall of the apartment.

I actually did not know that some single use grenade launchers, including the notorious Shmel, which means Bumblebee, could be operated autonomously with an electrical trigger. But I read the instructions and there is such an option! Hence, we dance...

On the top of the rotating block is a bundle, made from a grenade launcher and two Shmels.

Just a couple of months ago I tested this invention and it turned out well. Obviously, it is almost completely useless to shoot moving targets, but hitting an apartment window from a hundred meters is easy. By the way, the laser target comes in handy for that. We know the distance to the target (there’s a reason I carry binoculars with a built-in rangefinder…) Yes, I am not a sniper or an artillery gunner, but this all came in handy!

I hit another button and the view from the tripod camera appears on the screen. It’s part of this contraption, too. It’s not that fancy, but I don’t need fancy at the moment.

I have the control buttons at the bottom.

All right... here we go…

The desired window appears in the field of view.

Zoom, and now it fills most of the screen. I can see the laser dot at the bottom. Raise it up a little bit... got it!

Number one away!

The image twitches, nothing is visible for a while...

There was no one in this apartment.

That’s why there was no fear that anyone would detect the installation. How I snuck in, what I told Murky’s idiots? I don’t think anyone’s interested at this point. The entire contraption was assembled in an hour, luckily I had the necessary experience.

The payload from the grenade launcher easily broke the window into small pieces and hit the wall.

Ka-boom!

More than a kilo of explosives is nothing to sneeze at!

The blast was sudden! The cultist behind the machine gun even went a little deaf. Yes, the explosion was behind the wall, and most of the energy just scattered the furniture in the apartment. The room where the machine gunners were didn’t feel much... but it was enough for them all to get shellshocked to varying degrees.

But... it didn’t end there…

After a few seconds another «gift» flew through the hole made by the previous payload.

The only thing that flew out into the street was some burnt rags...

The priest that was running to building number five saw the explosion at one of the firing points, and after a delay realized that their plan, that seemed perfect, was suddenly in deep trouble.

Whoosh!

The shooter standing by the window bent over. His rifle fell out of his weakened hands and disappeared into the darkness.

Number two just had time to open his mouth in surprise…

Whoosh!

The brick wall flew apart with a cracking noise — the heavy bullet from an anti-tank rifle pierced it with ease. As well as the man who was hiding behind it…

Another firing point has been dealt with.

“Let’s go!”

The first one that comes through the door collapses on the floor. A terrible scream comes out of his mouth, the sharp shards of glass had sprayed his face.

“They’re on the right!”

“There’s a closet of some kind there!”

“Break it down!”

Bang, bang!

Buckshot hits the attackers. Shot at a height of about half a meter, the lead easily breaks bones and tears muscles apart.

“Aah! Fuck!” The wounded man rolls on the floor.

But the second shot stops his screams.

Chapter 27

Shit, there's a war going on... who are they fighting there behind the wall?

Well, that's for later… We still have business of our own to handle…

Click, the LEDs on the remote are on.

"Arm,» and the button is pressed.

It wasn't as loud this time as it was on the stairs, the charges are smaller.

There were only four TNT clumps, 100 grams each.

By the entrance, in the locker with the electric meter, by the balcony, behind a radiator, in a bookshelf deep in the apartment. And one in the kitchen, under an overturned fridge.

But when they go off together…

In short, the ambush near the stash was not an issue either, no one would leave a trap like this alive.

When the cultist running along Peter fell, the priest understood that control over the battle was hopelessly lost. Who was shooting, and from where — it was absolutely impossible to tell.

Sometimes something rumbled with a terrible sound. After one such shot, he saw how the machine gunner running to his left had his arm torn off! What this nightmare gun was, and how the shooter managed to shoot so accurately in total darkness, was impossible to understand yet.

«Drivers to Dark!”

The tramp that was assigned the radio station hastily pressed the button.

“We’re here!”

“Do you know building five on Granina?”

“Yes, we do! We see it!”

“Everyone who runs towards the building are enemies! Fucking kill them all!”

The windows, dark until now, flashed with gunfire. The tramps, longing for their turn, happily shot at the running figures.

Finally seeing a real enemy, the machine gunner turned his weapon.

A burst of gunfire.

Some flashing stopped, but he was not calming down — most likely the enemy just hid behind cover or changed their position. That’s fine... he’s patient... they’ll come out again at some point!

Something cracked, whooshed, and something pushed him in the shoulder…

«My arm? Yes, there’s my sleeve... but why is it so far away from me?”

The clouded consciousness has dulled the unbearable pain...

Only three people made it to the entrance, Peter and his two bodyguards. The third one was killed right in front of the door, a burst from an automatic rifle hit him from shoulder to shoulder. The shots

were fired from behind, in the backs of the runners.

‘We are simply being driven into this building!’ a hasty thought flashed through Peter’s head.

The priest wiped his forehead after he caught his breath.

“Do we have a connection?”

“Only with the group that’s storming the third floor. The firing points are silent, no response.”

Peter thought for a second.

“Well... tell them we’re going up to meet them. How can we get to their entrance?”

“Across the street, just run. But there’s a chance that…”

“No.”

“Through the balconies, but they are probably controlled by the sniper. And…» The cultist thought for a moment. “Through the attic... He won’t see us there, it’s the roof…”

“Let’s go upstairs. Give the assault team our route, have them send someone to meet us. They’ll check the stairs... The main thing is to take them alive! Shoot only at the extremities! And only if they are absolutely sure that’s what they’ll hit!”

They made it to the attic quickly. There was no trouble on the way. A shot from a pistol, and the lock falls to the floor. The bodyguard quickly climbed up the stairs and stuck his head out from the hatch.

“It’s empty... nobody’s here.”

“Let’s go!”

***

“Vortex to Eyes!”

“I hear you.”

“There’s some kind of commotion on the roof, above the first entrance. I see them sometimes, but the holes are small... I just can’t take a shot in time.”

“What do you mean, commotion?”

“Someone’s climbing along the attic.”

“Yeah... Moment!”

The servo-drives whirr, and there was still one shot.

“Do you see the laser?”

It’s silent.

“I see it.”

“Tell me where to aim…”

“Higher... some more... good! Now to the left. More... more... I saw them around here somewhere.”

“It’s not a rifle! Ten meters in any direction, this thing doesn’t give a fuck!”

“Yeah, I get it... That’s it, stop! Fire away!”

Ka-blam!

The house shuddered, the shooting stopped for a while, and some trash fell on me from the ceiling. The roof isn't gonna collapse here, is it? It shouldn't... the building is old, they built them well back then. Not a modern one, thank God, one of those quickly-built ones, that would have collapsed on my head ages ago after these explosions…

"Did I hit them?"

"Yeah... fuck knows, it's all topsy-turvy there now."

"Got it. I'm wearing a sensor, flashes. Don't shoot me by accident!"

"Where the fuck are you going?"

"Control... I have to make sure. By the way, across the street are our allies. Do me a favor and don't shoot them, okay?"

"Okay," the sniper laughs. "I've shot enough for today, you owe me!"

"Of course! But if anybody tries to go through the windows…"

"I'll see them, don't wet yourself!"

I put the tablet aside. That was a good idea, and it worked out like I needed it to. But the ammunition's exhausted, so it's no use now.

That question was on point. Where the fuck am I going?

Yeah... I've got an idea. Since there's such a serious battle there, their chief may think I'm there. And if he does, he may well want to see me die with his own eyes. Which means, he's very likely to be there!

I have to go.

And at the same time, I'll give these guys a hand, they've helped me out immensely. I honor them for this, and praise them! I don't want to be in debt, even to some Scavs. Even if it's bandits, they did me a favor! Not intentionally, sure... but they helped! I can put in a good word for them, Boar won't mind.

I attach an infrared marker to my shoulder — found them in the crate that keeps on giving.

ZIG is ready, let's go!

The balcony again, and crawling again. Fuck knows... what if Yurets missed someone? It's best not to take any chances...

The stairwell in the next entrance met me with the smell of gunpowder, loud swearing and some strange tension. It felt like the air itself was electrified! Light a match and it'll blow up!

Where to?

All this shit is going down a few floors lower, logically I should head there. But... I don't want to have anyone behind my back. Quick movement, and between the railing is a steel wire, stretched at knee height. I've got a small supply of it with me. It won't explode anything, but it's very easy to trip! I'll hear that... and roll down a couple of grenades... you'll feel better... all of you at once.

Okay, now I can go upstairs. Quietly, quietly, like a mouse approaching a piece of cheese…

In the eyepiece of the night vision goggles I see a characteristic outline. Yeah... there's someone upstairs! There's a hatch to the roof, or rather, to the attic, under that is where he's sitting. I was right to check it out…

Is he alone or what?

I don’t see anyone else there.

Well, man, it ain’t your day…

It’s not very convenient to shoot from that angle... but it’s stupid to stick your face out. Okay, let’s try this.

The submachine gun clapped, and the client arced his back. Got him!

Jump to the side, run up the stairs — bam!

He’s done for…

New magazine!

I fired ten rounds for sure, so it’s better to have a full magazine. Hell knows how things are gonna go... there’s no such thing as bullets you don’t need!

I did install a tripwire upstairs. Who knows who else is in that attic?

I go downstairs. Leave the wire or not?

Let it be…

This is the apartment where the sounds of gunfire and swearing are coming from.

***

“Sanya... are you all right?”

The young son stopped bandaging for a second, spit on the floor.

“It’s tolerable for now... it’s in my leg, but I can live. Ammo’s running out, only like five left.”

“And I’ve got about ten…” The older man hasn’t been seriously injured yet, but he’s got small hits in a lot of places, blood flowing from a lot of small wounds and scratches.

So far, they’ve been able to resist the pressure of the enemy. For whatever reason they did not use grenades, and didn’t shoot that often. It felt that they were just waiting for the defending side to run out of ammunition. Which was just about to happen.

It was rare they’d hit any of the attackers — they were no longer recklessly running out to be shot. But they fired often, mostly against the walls and ceiling. This was not in vain, the ricochets hit the defending side even behind cover.

The only saving grace was that the entrance hatch was narrow, and the exit to the balcony was safely barricaded with old furniture and rags. Bullets, let alone buckshot, didn’t make it through. So there was no way to approach from behind, and no one wanted to crawl through the narrow hole, it was a certain death.

Both father and son knew very well that they didn’t stand a chance. These guys didn’t come here just to scare them. Yes, at the very beginning of the battle they managed to seriously wound, or perhaps even kill a couple of people. But it didn’t change much — there were still more attackers, and they were better armed. If they made a serious attack…

“Hey!” Someone called from outside. “You in there, you’re not deaf yet, are you?”

“Fuck you!” Dmitry spit on the floor.

“All right! Well, we have a suggestion for you! We’re about to launch a couple of flares inside. You can’t put them out, they burn even in water. And I’m sure you don’t have a tub of water to throw them in. So if you don’t suffocate right away, you’re gonna roast like pigs. What do you think of that?”

“What do you want us to do?”

“You throw your guns out here and exit. With your arms up, no tricks! Then we’ll talk... Just one minute to think about this! It starts now!

“Fuck, I think we’re done for…» Wolf pursed his lips. “Doesn’t seem like they’re joking around.”

“So what do we do now?” The son looked at his gun. “Leave? They’ll fucking kill us…”

“And we suffocate or burn if we stay, he’s right.”

Dimitri examined their final resting place. He took a knife, tested the sharpness with his finger. He nodded and slipped it under his watch strap, so that the sleeve hid the weapon.

“Okay! I’m throwing out the sawed-off shotgun and come out first. You throw your gun too, but not too far! And you crawl after me. When you get out, I’ll try to distract them. And then... I hope you have the time. I’ll tell them you’re badly wounded and that’s why you crawl slowly. The wounded leg’s slowing you down.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if I went first?”

“With your leg? You can’t even stand up, and here you’d have to jump! You’ll show our hand and we’re both dead. Don’t argue, I know better!”

“Okay... let’s hug goodbye…”

The sawed off clanked as it hit the ground.

“Hey, don’t shoot! The first one is coming!”

Chapter 28

I put my ear to the door and listen. There's no more shooting in the apartment, I can hear voices. Someone's threatening someone... I don't understand…

Quick look!

To the left of the door, under the window, a man in a familiar cape and hood is slumped down. But the hood is now removed, and his head is tightly wrapped in bloody bandages. Yeah, a wounded one, I see…

There's another... um... body next to him. On a coat. His pants are torn, and the bandaged legs are covered with bloody stains. And a third one's just lying on the floor, he doesn't seem to care anymore, he's already dead. In the depth of the corridor I can make out the backs and heads of several other people, they, one assumes, are the ones talking.

How many of them can there be?

I can't see the room around the corner. It could fit a few more people in theory... but the defending party are somewhere, right? They're not in the cupboard, are they?

Okay... I can consider this for a long time, and it's not going to do any good!

Did you come here?

Yes, I did.

Did you come here of your own accord? Did anybody force you to come here?

No one.

Then what the fuck?!

The ignition fuse clicks, and a grenade flies around the corner.

Second one!

Third, I’m not greedy!

Open my mouth, cover my ears!

Boom!

The door was ripped off by the explosion and flew up the stairs. And then some rags. Someone’s clothes?

Boom!

A terrifying scream!

Boom!

ZIG in my hands, let’s go!

This is where I finally find a use for the tactical unit flashlight. The thick smoke and dust makes it impossible to see almost anything.

Somebody’s twitching body, a short burst!

Another one, another burst.

Someone’s leg, torn off... well, I don’t have to shoot that…

Change my magazine, no ammo.

That’s what they were hanging around…

From under a pile of bricks I can see the corner of an ordinary closet. The door is torn off, and in the light of the flashlight I can see a passage.

“Hey, anybody alive in here?”

Silence.

“So, anyone?”

Silence. Did they get that shellshocked?

Yeah... fuck knows. But I don’t want to go into that hole.

“Well, fuck you! Stay there if you don’t want to leave. I’m leaving, you take care of yourselves! But if you’re ever in real trouble, find Khokhol, say the Predator owes you one... he’ll find me…”

***

Peter opened his eyes.

It was already light out, and it was possible to see what was around him.

Broken roof beams, twisted sheets of roofing metal. He turned his eyes to the left.

A sad twenty-story building. That’s where the sniper fired at night, it seems. The window torn apart by a powerful explosion is the former firing point. What the hell happened to it?

He tried to move and a sharp pain pierced his whole body! His leg!

He was shot in the leg! He should call for help, he can't reach the base alone…

"Hey, hey…" His voice is hoarse, like through a pillow.

Spits, coughs.

"Hey…"

"Do you want some water?"

Who's there?

His head was very difficult to turn, his neck was in terrible pain.

There he is... sitting next to him on a fallen beam. Dirty, soot covered clothes, a vest with armor plates, common among USECs. A submachine gun with an integrated silencer, also their signature weapon. A helmet…

"Who are you?"

"Predator. And you, as I understand it," he said as he weighed the knife in his hand, a knife familiar to Peter down to the tiniest scratch, "are a priest?"

"Yes... my name is Peter."

"And why were you looking for me, Peter?"

"You are our enemy…"

"I'm not anyone's friend, that's more accurate. Nor am I yours. Okay, you looked for me, and you found me. What do you want from me?" The ominous man tilted his head.

“You need to be stopped…”

The Predator laughed a creepy laugh. It was downright terrifying… like a skull was grinning.

“They,” he nods to the side, “tried that. And they’re all lying there, dead. Some of them torn in half. You don’t have much time left either, the beam has broken both your legs, your spine is damaged, as far as I can tell... moving, let alone walking, is out of the question. And there’s a lot of blood…”

“I will be avenged!”

“No. You’re going to be paid for. I’ve already got two knives hanging on my belt, why hasn’t anyone ever gotten back at me so far? There’ll be a third... where will I hang them all?”

He stood up, surprisingly quickly.

“It’s time for me to go. I thought you’d say something useful... but fuck, a waste of time! You go, catch up with your co-workers, they’re not that far…”

The ominous figure turned and walked away. Stop him, shoot him! But the heavy hands were no longer listening to Peter.

Bricks squeaked under his feet, some wood cracked, and there was silence.

The Predator disappeared... as if he was never there…

T H E E N D

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 5

Chapter 2 20
Chapter 3 32
Chapter 4 44
Chapter 5 54
Chapter 6 60
Chapter 7 70
Chapter 8 77
Chapter 9 81
Chapter 10 93
Chapter 11 98
Chapter 12 104
Chapter 13 114
Chapter 14 120
Chapter 15 128
Chapter 16 131
Chapter 17 137
Chapter 18 144
Chapter 19 149
Chapter 20 157
Chapter 21 162
Chapter 22 169
Chapter 23 174
Chapter 24 180
Chapter 25 186
Chapter 26 193

Chapter 27 199
Chapter 28 205